George B. McClellan was one of the top Union military leaders during the early years of the Civil War. He took command of the Army of the Potomac in July 1861—following the Union’s humiliating defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run—and soon proved to be a great organizer and motivator of troops. When it came time to lead his forces into battle, however, McClellan became slow and indecisive. His shortcomings as a battlefield leader may have prevented the Union from capturing the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, during the Peninsula Campaign of spring 1862. In September of that year, his extreme caution allowed Confederate forces under Robert E. Lee (1807–1870; see entry) to escape after the Battle of Antietam in Maryland. McClellan was very popular with his troops, but his failures and his arrogance strained his relationship with Union political leaders. President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865; see entry) finally removed him from command in November 1862.
A high-achieving young man

George Brinton McClellan was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 3, 1826. He was the third of five children born to George McClellan, a doctor and founder of a medical school, and his wife, Elizabeth Brinton McClellan. Both of his parents belonged to old and distinguished Philadelphia families. As a result, McClellan had many advantages growing up. He attended a top preparatory school as a boy, then enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania at the age of thirteen. In 1842, he received an appointment to attend the prestigious U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York. At fifteen, McClellan was actually too young to become a cadet at West Point, but the school made an exception to its age rule for him. He had a brilliant career as a cadet (military student) and graduated second in his class in 1846.

After leaving West Point, McClellan joined the U.S. Army as an engineering officer. He served in the Mexican War (1846–48; a dispute between the United States and Mexico over large sections of territory in the West) and won two awards for distinguished service. After the United States forced Mexico to give up its claims on California and other areas in 1848, McClellan remained in the military and built forts, harbors, and railroads. He also became an instructor at West Point for three years. In the mid-1850s, McClellan traveled to Europe to study the latest military advancements. This was an important assignment for the young officer. Upon his return, he designed a new saddle for military use and introduced the pup tent to American forces. In 1857, McClellan resigned from the army to become an engineer in the rapidly growing railroad industry. By 1860, he had become president of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. He also married Ellen Marcy that year. They eventually had a son and a daughter together.

Rejoins the military at the start of the Civil War

McClellan's work in the railroad industry made him a wealthy man. But he remained interested in military matters, especially as ongoing disputes between the Northern and Southern sections of the country threatened to erupt into war. The main issue dividing the two regions was slavery. Growing numbers of Northerners believed that slavery was
wrong. Some people wanted to outlaw it, while others wanted to prevent it from spreading beyond the Southern states where it was already allowed. But slavery played an important role in the South’s economy and culture. As a result, many Southerners felt threatened by Northern efforts to contain slavery. They believed that each state should decide for itself whether to allow the practice. They did not want the national government to pass laws that would interfere with their traditional way of life.

America’s westward expansion further increased the tension between the North and South. Both sides wanted to spread their political views and way of life into the new states and territories. By 1861, the situation convinced a group of Southern states to secede (withdraw) from the United States and form a new country that allowed slavery, called the Confederate States of America. But Northern political leaders would not let the Southern states leave the Union without a fight. The Civil War began a short time later.

McClellan lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, when the war started. As the Northern states began to raise armies for the conflict, the governor of Ohio asked McClellan to take command of that state’s volunteer forces. Even though his main army service had been as an engineer, McClellan eagerly accepted the rank of major general in the Ohio Volunteers. His forces fought in some of the earliest clashes of the Civil War. They entered western Virginia—a region that remained sympathetic to the Union despite Virginia’s decision to secede—in July 1861. Their successful offensive (attack) chased most Confederate troops out of the area and cleared the way for Union supporters to separate from Virginia and establish their own state, known as West Virginia. McClellan took a great deal of credit for this early Northern success. He soon came to national attention as the Union’s first war hero.
Commands the Union’s Army of the Potomac

While McClellan was running Confederate forces out of western Virginia, the main Union Army was suffering an embarrassing defeat in July 1861 at the First Battle of Bull Run (also known as the First Battle of Manassas) in the eastern part of the state. Poorly prepared and terribly disorganized, the Army of the Potomac ended up making a panicked retreat back to Washington, D.C. President Abraham Lincoln reacted to the defeat by naming McClellan commander of the Army of the Potomac. At the age of thirty-four, McClellan took control of the North’s largest army. He became the second-highest ranking officer in the American military. The only soldier who outranked him was General Winfield Scott (1786–1866; see entry), the commander of all U.S. armed forces.

Within a short time, McClellan proved himself to be a great organizer and trainer of troops. He used tough training schedules and strict discipline to improve the army’s preparation and confidence. He made sure his men had the best arms and equipment, were well fed, and got paid on time. He also mingled with the troops and showed that he cared about them, which helped raise their morale. Over time, McClellan turned the inexperienced and demoralized Army of the Potomac into a strong fighting force. Thanks to the general’s personal style of leadership, the soldiers in the ranks almost worshiped him. In fact, he was more popular among his men than any other Civil War general.

Unfortunately, McClellan was not as popular among Northern political leaders. He tended to be arrogant and boastful, and he resented having civilian (non-military) officials tell him what to do. As a result, he clashed with President Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (1814–1869), and General Scott on many occasions. In fact, he actively worked against Scott and ended up forcing the elderly general to retire in November 1861. McClellan then took his place as general-in-chief of all the Union armies. By this time, Northern newspapers were calling McClellan the “Young Napoleon,” after the famous French military leader and emperor Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821).

Once McClellan had trained and supplied his troops, Northern political leaders expected him to launch an offensive strike against the Confederates in Virginia. But McClellan
continually found excuses to delay the attack. “So soon as I feel that my army is well organized and well disciplined and strong enough, I will advance and force the Rebels [Confederates] to a battle on a field of my own selection,” he stated. “A long time must elapse before I can do that.”

Part of the problem was that McClellan consistently overestimated the size and strength of the opposing forces. He became convinced that the Confederate Army waiting for him in Virginia consisted of 250,000 men, when in fact it was more like sixty thousand. By November 1861, he decided that he should wait for the end of winter before moving against the enemy. In December, he became ill with typhoid fever, which led to another delay of several weeks. But the main reason behind McClellan’s extreme caution and indecision was that he was unwilling to commit troops to battle unless he was guaranteed of success. “McClellan was capable and skilled in creating an army, but he had too much of a mother’s instinct in him, too much of the protective instinct,” according to William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani in *Civil War Journal: The Leaders*. “He was creating an army, and he wanted that army to be as good as any that had ever taken a battlefield, but at the same time he wanted no harm to come to it.”

**The Peninsula Campaign**

Lincoln finally forced McClellan into action. In January 1862, the president released General War Order No. 1, which called for a Union offensive into Virginia to begin by February 22. When the Army of the Potomac remained in Washington past that date, Lincoln punished McClellan for his inaction by stripping him of his title as general-in-chief over all Union forces. McClellan, who remained in charge of the Army of the Potomac, finally began his ambitious Peninsula Campaign in mid-March. Rather than marching through northern Virginia, he transported about one hundred thousand troops by boat to the Virginia coast. His army then marched inland up the peninsula toward the Confederate capital of Richmond.

At first, it appeared that McClellan’s plan would be successful. The Union forces met with little resistance and
Allan Pinkerton—
The Detective Who Convinced McClellan He Was Outnumbered

One of the main reasons Union general George B. McClellan was so reluctant to move against the Confederate Army was that he always believed he was outnumbered. For example, McClellan delayed the start of his Peninsula Campaign for six months because he thought there were 250,000 Confederate troops waiting for him in Virginia. But the real number of enemy forces was more like sixty thousand. The man who provided McClellan with these inflated estimates of Confederate troop strength was Allen Pinkerton, one of the best-known detectives of his day.

Pinkerton was born in 1819 in Glasgow, Scotland. He grew up in the city’s slums and eventually became involved in protests against conditions there. After a clash with police in 1841, Pinkerton smuggled himself aboard a boat heading across the Atlantic Ocean to Nova Scotia, Canada. He eventually moved to the United States and settled in Chicago, Illinois.

During his early years in Chicago, Pinkerton worked as a barrel maker. One time, his work led him directly to a band of counterfeiters (people who illegally produce and use fake money). He gave the police information about the band that led to their arrest. Soon afterward, Chicago merchants began hiring Pinkerton to help them track down other criminals.

In 1850, Pinkerton founded the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. It eventually became the nation’s largest private investigation firm. During the early years, his agency specialized in providing security for the rapidly growing railroad industry. In the late 1850s, he worked closely with McClellan, who was the vice president of an Illinois railroad company at that time.

In November 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected as the new president of the United States. He was scheduled to travel from Illinois to Washington, D.C., to be inaugurated (sworn in) in early 1861. Pinkerton’s detectives learned of a plan to assassinate Lincoln as he made his way to Washington. Pinkerton spoiled the plan by changing the president’s transportation plans at the last minute.

When the Civil War began a short time later, McClellan took command of volunteer forces in western Virginia. He asked Pinkerton to join his staff and provide military intelligence (information about the enemy) to assist in his war efforts. Before long, some of Pinkerton’s best detectives were moving behind Confederate lines in the South and collecting secrets to help the
George B. McClellan could expect to encounter in any given area. Pinkerton came up with a formula to help him determine enemy troop strength. Unfortunately, his assumptions were so far off that his estimates consistently turned out to be wrong. In fact, Pinkerton provided wildly inflated numbers that were often double or triple the actual figures. “Each step in Pinkerton’s collection of this military intelligence was marked by error, adding up finally to colossal [gigantic] error,” Stephen W. Sears explained in George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon.

Nevertheless, McClellan believed Pinkerton’s estimates without question. “McClellan accepted these reports with no more critical analysis than went into their making,” Sears noted. “They were, after all, exactly what he expected: confirmation of his own conclusions.” Due in part to Pinkerton, McClellan was extremely hesitant to move his army against the Confederates. His slowness prevented the Union from claiming major victories on two occasions, and forced Lincoln to remove McClellan from command in November 1862. Pinkerton quit working for the military at this time as well. He continued his detective agency after the war and died in 1884.

Union. Pinkerton also spent a great deal of time interviewing prisoners, refugees, and fugitive slaves who crossed into Union territory to find out what they knew about the enemy. He regularly produced long, detailed reports about conditions in the Confederate Army.

Pinkerton remained with McClellan as the young officer took command of the Army of the Potomac and then of all the Union forces. By this time, the famous detective’s most important job involved estimating the number of Confederate troops...
claimed victory in several minor battles as they moved toward Richmond. But then McClellan was tricked into thinking that the Confederates had established a major defensive position in Yorktown. He spent a month setting up a siege (a blockade intended to prevent delivery of food and supplies) of the town, only to have the small enemy force leave before he attacked. The delay enabled Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston (1807–1891; see entry) to prepare his troops for the defense of Richmond.

McClellan pushed past Yorktown in early May, but his army continued to move slowly. The long-awaited clash between McClellan’s and Johnston’s armies finally took place on May 31 at Fair Oaks, only six miles from Richmond. Although the fighting ended in a virtual draw, it resulted in a change in Confederate leadership. Johnston suffered a serious wound in the battle, and Robert E. Lee took his place. Lee soon proved that he was more cunning and aggressive than Johnston. On June 25, he led a force of seventy thousand Confederate troops against McClellan. The two sides engaged in a series of fierce battles across the Virginia peninsula over the next week. These clashes, which came to be known as the Seven Days’ Battles, convinced McClellan to abandon his offensive. Some historians claim that McClellan could have captured Richmond and ended the Civil War three years earlier if he had acted more quickly and decisively.

For his part, McClellan blamed Lincoln and the war department for his defeat. He claimed that they did not provide him with the reinforcements and supplies that he needed to win. “The president is an idiot!” he declared. “I only wish to save my country and find the incapables around me will not permit it.” By August 1862, Lincoln decided that he had endured enough of McClellan’s indecision and disrespect. He placed the Army of the Potomac under the com-
mand of Major General John Pope (1822–1892), who had already commanded the Federal Army of Virginia, and ordered them to return to Washington. But before McClellan’s troops could get back from the Virginia peninsula, Confederate forces attacked Pope’s army in northern Virginia. This contest, known as the Second Battle of Bull Run, resulted in another costly defeat for the Union.

**Replaced as commander following the Battle of Antietam**

As the losses continued to mount for the Union Army, many Northerners became concerned that the Confederates might win the war. President Lincoln knew that the lack of success in battle had left Union soldiers feeling fearful and discouraged. Recognizing the intense loyalty the troops felt toward McClellan, Lincoln made the difficult decision to return him to command of the Army of the Potomac. Once again, the young general turned the army around, improving the men’s discipline and morale.

In the meantime, Confederate general Robert E. Lee decided to take advantage of his recent victories to invade the North. He believed that if the Confederate Army proved that it was capable of seizing control of Northern territory, Lincoln might be forced to negotiate an end to the war. Lee led fifty-two thousand troops across the Potomac River into Maryland in early September. A few days later, McClellan left Washington with seventy-five thousand troops from the Army of the Potomac. On September 13, McClellan received an incredible stroke of good luck. One of his men found a copy of Lee’s orders to his army. The papers had been dropped by a careless Confederate officer.

McClellan’s discovery of Lee’s orders spurred him to close on the Confederate Army more quickly. But many historians claim that he was still too slow to act. Although his army reached Antietam Creek in western Maryland on September 16, McClellan decided to wait until the following day to launch an attack. The delay allowed Confederate troops under General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson (1824–1863; see entry) to arrive and reinforce Lee’s position. On September 17, the two armies finally met in a vicious day-long battle.
that killed or wounded more than twenty-three thousand Union and Confederate soldiers. This one-day casualty total marked the single bloodiest day in Civil War history.

By September 19, Lee decided to retreat back to Virginia. But it took his men some time to cross the swollen Potomac River. Some historians claim that if McClellan had launched another attack, he could have destroyed the Southern army. But the Union general was shaken by the high casualties his troops had suffered. “This Army is not now in condition to undertake another campaign nor to bring on another battle,” he stated. “I am tired of the sickening sight of the battlefield with its mangled corpses and poor, suffering wounded. Victory has no charms for me when purchased at such a cost.” As a result, McClellan did not pursue Lee’s army when it retreated. He thus gave up another opportunity to bring an earlier end to the war.

In November 1862, Lincoln relieved McClellan of his command for good. The young general had demonstrated great skills as an organizer and motivator. But when it came to leading troops into battle, he was a failure. “The tragedy of McClellan,” Davis, Pohanka, and Troiani wrote, “is that he failed to utilize his greatest strengths. His army would have done anything for him. . . . Yet he did not grant them that opportunity because it would mean that his beloved army would suffer.”

**Runs for president in 1864**

After being stripped of his command, McClellan returned home to Trenton, New Jersey, and waited for new orders. But no orders ever came. He continued to watch the war closely, however, and before long he decided that he might be able to affect the outcome through politics. In 1864, McClellan challenged Lincoln as the Democratic political party’s candidate for president. At first it appeared that he might be successful. But the Union Army claimed several important victories before the election that increased Northern support for Lincoln and the war effort. As a result, Lincoln returned to office by a comfortable margin. “For my country’s sake I deplore [regret] the result—but the people have decided with
their eyes wide open and I feel that a great weight is removed from my mind,” McClellan said afterward.

Following his failed presidential bid, McClellan took his family to Europe for several years. Upon returning to the United States, he went back to work in engineering. In 1878, he was elected governor of New Jersey. During his three-year term in office, he improved the state’s schools and built up a state militia. By the 1880s, McClellan finally decided that he was ready to face his Civil War record. He began speaking to veterans’ groups and visiting battlefields during this time. He also wrote a memoir of his days with the Army of the Potomac called McClellan’s Own Story. He defended his actions in the book, but also admitted that he lacked the killer instinct required of great battlefield generals. McClellan died suddenly of heart failure in Orange, New Jersey, on October 29, 1885. Many of the soldiers who had fought under him attended his funeral.

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