On November 1, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln appointed thirty-four-year-old George Brinton McClellan general in chief of the United States Army. The move was not unexpected. McClellan had known for some time that Brevet Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott's twenty-year tenure as commanding general was coming to an end. He also knew that Lincoln was considering no other man for Scott's replacement. Yet near the end of the meeting in which he informed McClellan of his promotion, Lincoln felt compelled to wonder out loud if overseeing the organization and operations of the western armies and the Army of the Potomac might be too much for any one man to handle. According to Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, McClellan quietly assured the president, "I can do it all." (1)

Much has been written about McClellan's tenure as commanding general of the United States Army from November 1861 to March 1862. The deterioration of the general's relationship with Lincoln, his clashes with congressional Republicans, and the inactivity of the Army of the Potomac during this period have all attracted much attention from historians seeking to understand the Union war effort. This essay will examine an aspect of McClellan's endeavors as commanding general that has yet to receive the same level of scrutiny: his efforts to direct the war west of the Appalachian Mountains. (2) Operations in Kentucky and Tennessee were taken into account in McClellan's comprehensive grand strategy, but the general faced obstacles in ensuring that those operations were directed toward the strategic and operational objectives he deemed most critical to the Union war effort.

One of the greatest problems McClellan encountered as he endeavored to direct the war in the West was Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck. The tendency of historians studying this relationship—and most command relationships during the Civil War, for that matter—has been to focus on how the personalities of the two men limited their cooperation. (3) Traditionally, problems in the McClellan-Halleck relationship have been attributed to a clash of two monumental egotists who, among their many defects as military men, were afflicted with a myopia that rendered them incapable of seeing beyond their own needs and unable to conceive of the Union war effort as a whole. To be sure, McClellan and Halleck both had high opinions of themselves and were, naturally, most sensitive to the particular needs of their own commands. Yet there are two other factors that deserve greater consideration from historians seeking to understand this important command relationship and the war in the
West in early 1862. The first is the fundamentally different analyses McClellan and Halleck made of the military problem facing the North, from which flowed conflicting views on strategic and operational priorities in the West. In early 1862, the two men found themselves in conflict as each endeavored to ensure operations in Kentucky and Tennessee were directed toward objectives that corresponded with his particular vision of Union strategy. The second factor that would compromise seriously McClellan’s efforts was the institutional weakness of the office of general in chief--a problem that made nearly inevitable his ultimate defeat in the struggle with Halleck for control of the Union war effort in the West.

On October 31, one day before his appointment to replace Scott, McClellan laid out in a letter to Secretary of War Simon Cameron what he wanted to do once he was general in chief. McClellan advised his superiors that, if they shared his desire to avoid a winter of inactivity, they should have Union forces west of the Appalachian Mountains assume a strictly defensive posture and send whatever troops not needed for that purpose to the Army of the Potomac. Virginia, he unambiguously stated, was where the North must keep its "attention and efforts..., fixed upon [as] the vital point of the war where the issue of the great contest is to be decided." If his plan were adopted, McClellan predicted that operations to achieve "the great object to be accomplished--the crushing defeat of the rebel army at Manassas" could begin by the end of November. (4)

It quickly became clear, however, that political considerations would not permit implementation of this proposal. In the weeks before McClellan became general in chief, western politicians had begun voicing complaints that the Army of the Potomac was receiving an unacceptably disproportionate share of the North's military talent and resources, and as a consequence the Old Northwest was terribly "exposed to danger." Advised of these complaints by the president, McClellan abandoned any notion of implementing the strategic plan he had proposed to Cameron. Instead of transferring troops from the West to Virginia, he decided he would leave them in place and operate against the Confederacy on several fronts simultaneously, following the outlines of a plan he presented to Lincoln in August but had since set aside. The starting date for this grand offensive would depend on the state of affairs in Kentucky and Missouri. Unfortunately, McClellan quickly learned that the rest of the Union war machine was "just about as disorganized as was the Army of the Potomac when I assumed command; everything at sixes and sevens--no system, no order--perfect chaos." (5)
On November 9 McClellan formally organized the area west of the Appalachian Mountains into four departments. The first two, Edward R. S. Canby's Department of New Mexico and David Hunter's Department of Kansas were military backwaters and, with the exception of Hunter and Kansas senator James H. Lane, no one believed that operations in these departments would have a significant impact on the outcome of the war. The other two, however, Don Carlos Buell's Department of the Ohio and Henry W. Halleck's Department of Missouri, were set up with an eye on securing military and political objectives that were critical to the success of McClellan's strategic plan. The military skill of these two department commanders and their ability to work with McClellan would go a long way toward determining its success or failure—or whether it would be followed at all. (6)

Although in retrospect it is clear that sources of conflict existed from the beginning, few in 1861 would have predicted that McClellan and Halleck would have problems working together, for the two had much in common. Like McClellan, Halleck was a superb organizer and administrator, a methodical strategist and tactician, and a man with a decided preference for West Point-trained officers. Both men were also enthusiastic students of military history and science who graduated near the top of their respective classes at West Point and were favorites of both Dennis Hart Mahan, the Academy's distinguished professor of military and civil engineering, and Commanding General Scott. Moreover, like many other highly regarded junior officers, both McClellan and Halleck left the army during the 1850s to pursue more lucrative opportunities in the civilian world. By 1861 McClellan was one of the country's most highly regarded railroad executives, while Halleck had become a fabulously successful lawyer in California. Authorship of a well-known military textbook, Elements of Military Art and Science, and several other works were among the many accomplishments that, in combination with his appearance, earned Halleck the nickname "Old Brains." (7)

Although less impressed than most with Halleck's military acumen, McClellan did not object to Old Brains's appointment to command Union forces in Missouri. He did so fully aware that Halleck had been his main rival for the honor of succeeding Scott as commanding general. Infuriated by Lincoln's and McClellan's habitual bypassing of the chain of command to communicate directly with each other, in October 1861 Scott made it clear to anyone who would listen during his last weeks as commanding general that he wanted Halleck, not McClellan, to replace him. To his credit, Halleck never openly protested Lincoln's disregard of Scott's wishes. Nonetheless, troubling seeds had been planted. After all, Halleck had not accomplished all that he had before the war by keeping a tight rein on his burning ambition or by deferring to others when their views conflicted with his own. (8)
The problem of professional rivalry was exacerbated by McClellan and Halleck possessing fundamentally different visions of the ideas that should guide Union strategy. Whatever qualms McClellan may have felt at the appointment to high command of a potential rival were no doubt eased by the knowledge that in the strategic plan he intended to implement, operations in Halleck's department, while not inconsequential, were neither required nor expected to achieve great victories. As McClellan saw it, the greatest strategic and operational burden—and opportunities for laurels—in the war belonged to his Army of the Potomac. The general never wavered in his belief that achieving an overwhelming victory in Virginia was by far the Union army's most important strategic objective, with the occupation of East Tennessee ranking well above operations in the Mississippi Valley on his list of strategic priorities. (9)

McClellan was of course well aware that for political reasons the Lincoln administration could not let the Mississippi River remain under Confederate control for very long. He had no intention, however, of letting the war drag on long enough for that to become a problem. A policy of conciliation toward Southern civilians and their property would undermine the South's will to resist, while a knockout blow in Virginia, facilitated by the occupation of East Tennessee, would deprive the Confederacy of the Old Dominion's industrial and agricultural resources, political institutions, and military talent—all of which were essential to the success of the rebellion. Once the head, Virginia, was cut off, McClellan believed the rest of the Confederacy would quickly collapse.

McClellan did recognize that some effort was required along the Mississippi River, if only to placate western politicians and pin down Confederate troops that might otherwise be redeployed to bolster resistance to Union operations in Virginia and East Tennessee. Yet as McClellan saw it, committing too many resources to the Mississippi would be counterproductive, as it would inevitably detract from the effort to achieve the quick victory in Virginia that was the key to his strategy.

Halleck, however, like his mentor Winfield Scott and protege William T. Sherman, did not share McClellan's optimism that the war could be won quickly and viewed the Mississippi River, not Virginia--and certainly not East Tennessee--as the most important line of operations. To make matters worse, the division of the western theater between himself and Buell violated what Halleck consistently proclaimed in his writings to be the most important rule to follow in the conduct of war: concentration of force on a single line of operations. That McClellan clearly gave greater priority to Buell's efforts, and enjoyed a close relationship with Buell, rankled Halleck professionally and personally. Quickly Halleck decided that he would take advantage of his distance from Washington to reshape the war in the west so that it served his interests and followed his strategic and operational vision, rather than what he perceived to be the misguided approach of the general in chief. (10)
If McClellan anticipated problems with Halleck it is not evident in their early correspondence, in which he laid out for the western commander the organizational, political, and operational goals that were to guide his efforts in Missouri. Halleck's first priority, McClellan informed him, was to repair the damage that Major General John C. Fremont had inflicted on the Union cause in Missouri. McClellan instructed Halleck to "reduce to a point of economy ... a system of reckless expenditure and fraud perhaps unheard of before in the history of the world." In addition, Halleck was to "Labor to impress upon the inhabitants of Missouri and the adjacent States that we are fighting solely for the integrity of the Union, to uphold the power of the National Government, and to restore to the nation the blessings of peace and good order." Finally, McClellan told Halleck to fortify certain interior points in Missouri, while "concentrating the mass of troops on or near the Mississippi, prepared for such ulterior operations as the public interests may demand." At no point in the month after he received this letter did Halleck provide any hint that he disagreed with its contents in the slightest. (11)

Destined to be caught in the crossfire between McClellan and Halleck was Buell, whose command Halleck hoped would support his efforts to secure the Mississippi River and McClellan wanted to focus on redeeming Unionist East Tennessee. "An admirable soldier in every regard," was McClellan's postwar assessment of Buell, who brought to his new command twenty years' experience in the regular army and a reputation as one of its finer officers. Historian T. Harry Williams described Buell as a "McClellan without charm or glamor," and the description is apt, for the two men possessed a common approach to the art of war and a deep mutual respect that was not present in the McClellan-Halleck relationship. Like McClellan, Buell was a gifted administrator and thorough military professional who believed in conducting operations in a tightly controlled, methodical, and deliberate manner to minimize risk and bloodshed. (12)

McClellan and Buell also shared a common approach to the critical question of what Union policy should be toward Southerners and their property. Both believed most Southerners were not committed to independence and could be wooed back to the Union; consequently, they believed the North should adopt a policy of conciliation. Under the conciliatory approach, Rebel armies were to be crushed, but the property and constitutional rights of civilians and the institution of slavery were to be rigorously respected. Assured that the Federal government meant them no harm, advocates of conciliation believed that Southerners would see the futility of continued resistance and return to the Union. Making war on civilians and slavery, they argued, would be counterproductive, for it would drive Southerners who were lukewarm about secession into the arms of the Confederate government in order to protect their interests. (13)
As he had with Halleck, before Buell left for Kentucky, McClellan laid out for him "general ideas which occur to me in relation to the conduct of operations there." First, he told Buell that he would be responsible for that part of Kentucky east of the Cumberland River, a command McClellan viewed as second only to the Army of the Potomac in importance. He then noted that from a purely strategic and logistical standpoint, Nashville was probably the "first and principal objective point," as Buell would be able to advance along a railroad toward what was the capital of Tennessee and an important industrial center. However, McClellan advised Buell, the need to rescue the loyal population of eastern Tennessee made it "proper that you should remain on the defensive in the line from Louisville to Nashville, while you throw the mass of your forces by rapid marches ... on Knoxville." East Tennessee Unionists were not the only consideration that made that region Buell's primary operational objective and second only to Virginia on McClellan's list of priorities. Union control of East Tennessee would also support operations in Virginia by denying Confederate military authorities use of the railroad that connected the Old Dominion with the West. (14)

On November 20, 1861, shortly after seeing Halleck and Buell off, McClellan conducted a grand review of the Army of the Potomac at Munson's Hill, Virginia. Thirty thousand spectators watched the largest force ever brought together in one place on the American continent execute parade ground maneuvers with a precision that led McClellan to exult to his wife afterward: "I never saw so grand a review in Europe so well done--I was completely satisfied and delighted beyond expression." The press and public likewise marveled at the spectacle and concluded that McClellan would soon take his army southward to avenge Bull Run. They were to be disappointed. Many factors played a role in shaping McClellan's decision that the grand Union offensive would not begin until 1862, but first among them were the reports that arrived at army headquarters after Buell and Halleck had taken the measure of their new commands. (15)

Buell arrived at Louisville on November 15 and found an operational and organizational mess. To make matters worse, shortly after his arrival, Buell received a telegram from McClellan stating that "political and strategical considerations" made a "prompt movement in force on Eastern Tennessee imperative." If Buell should determine that circumstances made an immediate advance impossible, McClellan assured him such a decision would be supported. But, he added, a direct movement on Knoxville, where Confederate authorities were at that moment putting down a Unionist revolt, must not be delayed a single minute. (16)
Plagued with administrative problems inherited from his predecessor William T. Sherman, Buell needed until November 27 before he could concentrate his forces at Louisville, which he proclaimed "the best base that can be taken for land operations from the north upon any part of Tennessee." He then proposed having one column menace Bowling Green, Kentucky, to hold the Confederate force there in place while another pushed into East Tennessee via Somerset. At the same time, a third column would swing around Bowling Green toward Nashville in conjunction with "two flotilla columns" pushing up the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Buell also advised McClellan, however, that the condition of his command would not permit the undertaking of these operations right away. To avoid "the appearance of complaining" and secure that his friend would not be inclined to demand details, Buell did not explain why this was the case, but closed the letter by stating, "I am afraid that I shall have to ask a little patience." (17)

McClellan wrote back two days later thanking Buell for the letter and "expressing my satisfaction at its contents. I now feel sure that I have a `lieutenant' in whom I can fully rely." Although he admitted his own intelligence about the region was weak, McClellan suggested that the advance into East Tennessee might be carried out with 15,000 men, while 50,000 operated against Nashville. He also took care, however, to advise: "We owe it to our Union friends in Tennessee to protect them at all hazards. First, secure that; then, if you possess the means, carry Nashville.... Inform me some little time before you are ready to move, so that we may move simultaneously." (18)

In Missouri, Halleck assumed command on November 19 and immediately found, he informed McClellan nine days later, that the mess left by Fremont was worse than they expected. "Complete chaos," Halleck discovered, along with "astonishing orders and contracts for supplies of all kinds.... If ever really received, they have either been stolen or diverted." Then, on December 6, Halleck advised McClellan not to expect an expedition down the Mississippi to support Buell's operations any time soon. "The army here," he complained, "is more disorganized than that of the Potomac after [Bull Run].... in many places mutinous and disbanding." "I will," Halleck vowed, "restore order and rout the enemy if you will give me time and assistance." He gave no specifics as to how long it would take, but did tell the commanding general that: "Every one appreciates the change which you have effected in [your] army in five months. I hope ... to do the same here." (19)
Halleck’s messages killed whatever faint hopes the general in chief still had that his grand offensive could begin before winter. "I appreciate the difficulty of the task before you," McClellan empathetically wrote back, "rest assured that I will support you to the full extent of my ability." He also pressed Halleck for a rough estimate of when operations along the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland Rivers could be undertaken to support Buell. On December 16 Halleck thanked McClellan for his assurances of support, but ignored his request for a timetable for operations. (20)

In addition to sorting out the mess left by his predecessor, Halleck let it be known during his first month in command that he, like Buell and McClellan, embraced the policy of conciliation. On November 20 he issued General Orders No. 3, stating that fugitive slaves would no longer be permitted with in Federal lines or allowed to accompany Union forces on the march. Six days later he moved to put an end to the seizure and destruction of private property, which he proclaimed “an outrageous abuse of power and a violation of the laws of war.” Exceptions would be made where “the subsistence or transportation of the troops” depended on the seizure of property or in the case of those in arms against the United States or providing direct assistance to the enemy. Halleck also mandated that strict procedures would be followed to ensure the excesses and injustices committed in Missouri prior to his assumption of command, which he noted had cast “discredit upon our patriotic army” in the minds of Missourians, would not be repeated. (21)

Within a month, frustration with Missouri guerrillas had eroded Halleck’s support for conciliation and he began moving toward a “pragmatic policy” in his dealings with civilians. Conciliation, based on a belief that the North could win the war without having to physically conquer the South, sought to encourage Southerners to cease their resistance by rigorously respecting their property and persons to assure them of the good will of the Union. In contrast, the pragmatic policy, consistent with Halleck’s own perception of the conflict, viewed the war purely as a military contest. It did not concern itself with swaying popular opinion in the South; rather, Halleck’s goal was, in the words of historian Mark Grimsley, “to keep civilians on the sidelines.” To this end, the pragmatic policy “supported Unionists, punished active secessionists, and expected the remaining population to remain quiescent.” (22)
For the most part, President Lincoln was content to leave military affairs in McClellan’s hands throughout November and most of December 1861. But then on December 23 McClellan fell ill with typhoid fever, which limited his ability to correspond with his western commanders. Lincoln did not view this as a cause for concern until December 31. That day, the general’s condition took a turn for the worse and rumors circulated around Washington that his life was in danger. Lincoln responded by contacting Buell and Halleck to find out if they were in contact and capable of undertaking a simultaneous advance, with Halleck menacing Columbus, Kentucky, while Buell marched on East Tennessee. After learning that Halleck and Buell were not in contact with one another and that neither commander felt ready to take the offensive, Lincoln spent much of the first week of 1862 exchanging telegrams with St. Louis and Louisville in an effort to get things moving in Kentucky and along the Mississippi. (23)

When he could see the general, Lincoln kept McClellan apprised of his correspondence with Halleck and Buell and was still quite content with McClellan’s performance as general in chief. Yet McClellan recognized that the president’s suddenly increased involvement in military affairs was in part a response to growing public impatience with military inaction. Consequently, as he recuperated from his illness the general decided that Buell must advance at once whether or not Halleck was ready. After a stormy meeting with Lincoln and several of his advisers on January 13, McClellan felt compelled to issue preemptory orders to Buell. "You have no idea of the pressure brought to bear here upon the government for a forward movement," McClellan told Buell. "It is so strong that it seems absolutely necessary to make the advance on East Tennessee at once.... It is no time now to stand on trifles." (24)

Two days later, in a three-hour interview with New York Herald correspondent Malcolm Ives, McClellan laid out his current strategic plan. He informed Ives that Buell would have a column marching toward East Tennessee within a week, while at the same time an expedition under Ambrose Burnside would attack the North Carolina shore. Buell would soon thereafter send a second column against Nashville, with Halleck cooperating with him and finishing off Confederate forces in Missouri. Once Buell had seized the railroad between Virginia and the west, and Burnside cut off communication between the Old Dominion and the Carolinas, McClellan predicted that the Rebels in Virginia would be in a desperate situation. He gave no details to Ives regarding what he would then do with the Army of the Potomac. "But," Ives assured the publisher of the Herald the following day, "he will beat the rebels and the rebellion will be ended, or, at least, its strength will be irrevocably broken." What was left of the Confederacy, McClellan predicted, would probably choose Louisiana as the last refuge. There the commanding general, once victory had been achieved in Virginia, would lead the final operation against New Orleans that would finish off the rebellion. Left unsaid in this interview was any suggestion that Halleck
would undertake operations that had securing the Mississippi River itself as the objective. Driving the last Rebels from Missouri and supporting Buell, McClellan implied, were the sole ends to which he expected Halleck to direct his operations. (25)

To find the means necessary to support Buell's operations without weakening Halleck, McClellan in mid-January conceived a plan in which a large contingent would be sent from the Army of the Potomac to Kentucky. Winter rains and snow had turned Virginia roads to mud. The new secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, enthusiastically endorsed the idea when it was presented to him and immediately dispatched Assistant Secretary of War Thomas A. Scott to the west to see if such a move would be practical, and if so, how much it would cost. After a brief investigation, Scott reported to Stanton that it would in fact be feasible logistically and financially, but by the time he determined this, Lincoln had mandated that major operations begin in Virginia by the end of February. This killed any thoughts McClellan had of significantly diminishing the strength of his own army, although he did make an effort in early February to scrape together a "marine division" from New England regiments in the Army of the Potomac for service on the western rivers. (26)

By then, things had begun to happen in the West. During the second week of January Buell pushed a force under Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas toward southeastern Kentucky. Yet after routing a Rebel force at Mill Springs on January 19, 1862, Thomas found the condition of the roads made a push toward East Tennessee logistically impossible and asked Buell for permission to move in the direction of Bowling Green instead. Buell passed along Thomas's request to Washington and advised McClellan that he had "been forced reluctantly to the conviction that an advance into East Tennessee is impracticable at this time on any scale which will be sufficient." Instead, he proposed moving "at once against Bowling Green." (27)

Before McClellan could respond to this message, a false report reached his desk that the Confederate government had sent fifteen regiments to Kentucky. He promptly forwarded the information to Halleck, who then pushed a force under Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Com. Andrew Foote up the Tennessee River toward Fort Henry on January 30. Grant's and Foote's operation, in Halleck's mind, constituted the eastern wing of a three-prong advance of his forces along a broad front that would secure control of a large portion of the Mississippi River (the other two wings consisted of Brig. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis's army in Missouri and Brig. Gen. John Pope's along the river itself). Halleck informed McClellan and Buell of his orders to Grant and, when asked by Buell if he could be of assistance, brushed the offer aside, evidently believing Fort Henry was his prize alone. A few days later, however, Halleck informed McClellan that he feared Fort Henry had been reinforced and troops from Buell's command would in fact be needed. (28)
As Grant closed on Fort Henry, McClellan telegraphed Halleck and Buell to suggest that since the poor condition of the roads between the latter and East Tennessee made a direct advance into the region impossible, it might be best if all forces between the Mississippi and the Appalachians were concentrated on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Before they could respond, Fort Henry surrendered. Halleck then advised McClellan that "every man not required to defend Green River should be sent to the Tennessee River or Cumberland.... Send me everything you can from General Buell's command or elsewhere." McClellan wrote back congratulating Halleck on Grant's success and suggested that either "Buell or yourself should go to the scene of operations. Why not have Buell take the line of the Tennessee and operate on Nashville, while your troops take Columbus?" (29)

Halleck did not like this plan. He had proposed moving Buell's force to the rivers on the presumption that both forces would be combined with himself, as senior officer, in overall command in the field. Directing a mopping up operation against Columbus while Buell received the plum assignment of taking Nashville as a first step toward an advance against East Tennessee was not what he had in mind. Consequently, Halleck wrote back on February 8 with a counterproposal—that all of the departments west of the Appalachians be combined into a single "Western Division." Although he denied a desire "for any larger command," there was no doubt that he had himself in mind for overall command. As he awaited Washington's response to this idea, Halleck requested that significant reinforcements from Buell's command, but not Buell himself, go to the Cumberland to assist Grant, who had commenced operations against Fort Donelson. (30)

On February 14 McClellan wrote to Halleck to dismiss his "Western Division" proposal and advised him that: "If you do not go in person to the Tennessee and Cumberland I shall probably write Buell to take the line of the Tennessee so far as Nashville is concerned." The following day Halleck replied that reports indicated the enemy was evacuating Bowling Green. But, he complained, it was not clear whether the Rebels would fall back on Nashville or "concentrate on me" at Fort Donelson. In either case, Halleck thought it was imperative that he receive more troops from Buell's department. McClellan responded that he believed Buell's forces could best support operations against Fort Donelson by marching directly from Bowling Green to Nashville, which would menace the Confederate rear. (31)
The idea that Buell might stroll into Nashville while his own command was battling the enemy at Fort Donelson was too much for Halleck to stand. He bluntly wrote McClellan that sending Buell to Nashville was "bad strategy" and demanded that Buell instead send reinforcements to Grant. McClellan ignored Halleck's aspersion on his generalship and pointed out to the general that "if Buell can rapidly advance on Nashville he will take it and cut off the enemy who are near Fort Donelson ... at once relieving Grant." (32)

While Halleck and McClellan dickered, Buell wrote McClellan that he was willing to send three brigades to assist in the operation against Fort Donelson, while pushing the rest of his command toward Nashville. If, however, he learned that Grant was secure, Buell advised the commanding general that he would not send the reinforcements to Halleck, but instead keep his forces concentrated for the move on Nashville. McClellan fully approved Buell's proposal. "Time is now everything," he advised Buell. "If you can occupy Nashville at once it will end the war in Tennessee." (33)

Halleck remained convinced that Buell's move on Nashville was a bad idea while the fate of Fort Donelson remained undecided. He continued to express his opinions in no uncertain terms to both McClellan and Buell. On February 16, however, the situation changed when Fort Donelson capitulated to Grant. Although he deserved little credit for Grant's success--and indeed it had discredited the warnings of disaster through which he had spent the previous week attempting to secure control over Buell--it only served to further excite Halleck's ambition. "Give me command of the West," he demanded in a letter to McClellan on February 17, "in return for Forts Henry and Donelson." (34)

Halleck repeated his request on the nineteenth and twentieth and--even though his command was now secure--redoubled his efforts to dissuade Buell from pushing on to Nashville independently. Instead, he urged Buell to go to Clarksville to link up with Grant. From there he suggested they could push on to Nashville with Buell in immediate command. Buell, however, with McClellan's support, was committed to moving on Nashville independently and declined the offer. (35)

The division of command in the West was becoming a problem. A clash of egos and disagreements on operational priorities were increasingly evident, problems that could only be remedied by a firm assertion of authority by the general in chief. Yet, as historians Stephen W. Sears and Rowena Reed have noted, McClellan did not impose his authority on his subordinates in the west. Instead of giving orders that Halleck and Buell would be bound to obey, he consistently presented his wishes as suggestions throughout the winter of 1861-62. (36)
Certainly, if McClellan wanted to ensure his subordinates fully cooperated and did not act in a way that would clash with his own plans and strategic vision, a firm reminder at some point of who exactly was in charge and that there were limits to their discretion would have been appropriate. With a different man in St. Louis, this might not have been necessary. Halleck's growing determination to chart his own course made it essential. Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to imply that McClellan's restraint in dealing with his western subordinates was simply rooted in a lack of steel in his character that made him, in Sears's words, "less decisive than he seemed" and inclined to a "more leisurely policy of writing letters to his generals with ideas and suggestions." (37)

There were in fact important factors beyond the general's control that must be taken into consideration when considering his failure to assert his authority more firmly in his correspondence with his Halleck and Buell. The first was the practical matter of distance. McClellan was several hundred miles away from the theater of operations and busy getting his own army ready in Virginia. And although the telegraph provided the means for almost instant communication, it was often unreliable. Located in Washington, McClellan could not monitor the highly fluid situation in Tennessee as closely as could Halleck and Buell. Thus, there really was little alternative to providing them with a great deal of autonomy in conducting operations.

Second, the general in chief's power to impose his will on the armies of the United States was anything but absolute or even clearly defined. The office of commanding general was established after the War of 1812 as part of Secretary of War John C. Calhoun's effort to bring greater centralization and professionalization to the management of the U.S. Army. After creating the position, Calhoun and his fellow reformers did not, however, clearly define the commanding general's place in the military chain of command during wartime. Was he merely an adviser to the civilian authorities who under the Constitution had authority over the military, or did he actually exercise command authority over subordinate commanders? This was a ticklish question, for if the general in chief really did command the army, in the words of historians Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, "he would usurp the Secretary of War's constitutional duty as the President's appointed deputy; but if he did not, his position was meaningless." During the tenures of the first two men to hold the post, Jacob Brown and Alexander Macomb, there was no opportunity to define the role of the commanding general in the nation's command structure in wartime. The third man who held the post, Winfield Scott, did serve during a war. However, the Mexican War, the only major conflict the United States engaged in between the establishment of the position of commanding general and the Civil War, did little to clarify the issue. (38)
In their analysis of the role the general in chief played in the Union war effort, Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones—drawing upon the writings of Amitai Etzioni—usefully called attention to the distinction between formal leaders “who derive their power from their office” and informal leaders whose authority is a product of their personality and relations with their subordinates. During the Civil War the office of commanding general did not possess a great deal of formal power. As a consequence, the command authority the position enjoyed heavily depended upon the man who held it and the particular situations he faced. In the first months of the war, Scott was treated by the Lincoln administration largely as a figurehead. Subordinate commanders—most notoriously, and ironically, McClellan—had few reservations about defying his authority. After he replaced Scott, McClellan began centralizing staff functions and strategic planning because Lincoln, out of deference to the general’s military expertise, allowed it and the secretary of war, Simon Cameron, was not inclined to challenge the commanding general’s authority. Had this situation continued, McClellan might have dealt more forcefully with his western subordinates in early 1862. However, when Edwin Stanton replaced Cameron in mid-January 1862 and made it clear he would play a much more active role in military affairs than his predecessor, it proved to be a major blow to McClellan and the office he held that neither ever recovered from. Ironically, after benefiting from this in his dealings with McClellan in early 1862, Halleck himself would end up spending more months than any other man during the Civil War struggling with the limitations of the commanding general’s office. (39)

The evident institutional and political weakness of McClellan’s position, combined with Grant’s victories, emboldened Halleck after Fort Donelson. When Halleck received letters from McClellan that flatly rejected his call for a unified command and urged him to do what he could to support Buell’s advance on Nashville, he refused to bend to the will of the commanding general. Nothing if not persistent when he believed himself in the right, Halleck responded to McClellan’s rebuffs by taking his case for a unified command to Stanton. At the same time, to ensure that Grant, whose victory at Fort Donelson had made him a national hero, did not become a threat, Halleck began a venomous campaign of intrigue against the quiet, but dogged, Illinoisan. He also chose to push Pope’s operations along the Mississippi River, rather than follow McClellan’s instructions that he support Buell. Halleck did this even though the commanding general had explicitly advised him on January 29 that, aside from taking Columbus, Kentucky—the vaunted Confederate “Gibraltar of the West”—“my own ideas from the beginning ... [have] ever been against a movement in force down the Mississippi itself.” Despite Halleck’s behavior, on February 23 elements from Buell’s command managed to reach the north bank of the Cumberland opposite Nashville. Before he could cross the river and claim the city, however, a division Grant sent upriver on his own initiative occupied the town. (40)
With the Confederate line in the West shattered by the fall of Fort Donelson, the Union high command faced the question of what to do next. On February 24 McClellan had his plan. He first urged Halleck to "cooperate with [Buell] to the full extent of your power ... to secure Nashville beyond a doubt." Then he proposed that "a combined movement of troops and gun boats" seize Decatur, Alabama, where the railroad connecting Chattanooga and Memphis crossed the Tennessee River. This would drive a wedge between Confederate forces at Chattanooga and those in the Mississippi Valley, depriving the enemy of the ability to quickly concentrate against either Halleck's or Buell's armies as they operated separately against their respective objectives. As Halleck was seizing Decatur, Buell would move toward securing control of East Tennessee by occupying "the railroad junctions in vicinity of Chattanooga and to reestablish the railroads from Nashville to Decatur and Stevenson." Once this had been accomplished, McClellan envisioned Halleck's next move would be "either a direct march in force upon the rear of Memphis or else first upon the communications and rear of Columbus." (41)

McClellan's proposal, which was consistent with his view that securing East Tennessee was the first priority in the West and the Mississippi River a distant second, would not be implemented. Buell, who was busy consolidating his position at Nashville and working with some success to conciliate the local population, had no objections to the plan. He did feel compelled to complain to McClellan that he was finding it increasingly difficult to "get exactly at what Halleck is doing." (42)

What Halleck was doing was making it clear by his actions that he had little interest in McClellan's proposed operation against Decatur. After finally compelling the evacuation of Columbus on March 2, Halleck made clearing the rest of the upper Mississippi River--what he viewed as the North's most important priority--his next objective, not Decatur. To this end he made arrangements to reinforce Pope's command and pushed a force up the Tennessee River to Savannah. From Savannah, instead of continuing upriver east to Decatur, he planned to move to Pittsburg Landing on the west bank of the Tennessee and advance south overland from there with the goal of seizing the railroad junction at Corinth, Mississippi. The occupation of Corinth would finish the task of securing western Tennessee, an accomplishment that Halleck believed would be "worth three Richmonds." Corinth was indeed an important point for Union forces to occupy in the upper Mississippi Valley, but, as events during the summer of 1862 would demonstrate, an extremely poor position from which to support an operation against East Tennessee. (43)
Even as he was quietly undermining McClellan's plans and authority in the aftermath of Fort Donelson, Halleck avoided an open break with the commanding general. He did this by giving McClellan no hint of his actual operational intentions and posing as a loyal subordinate who could be entrusted with overall command in the West. As part of this campaign, on February 24 Halleck sent McClellan what historian Stephen E. Ambrose labeled a "masterfully composed letter ... in sycophant fashion" designed to appeal to the commanding general's "vanity, his fear and hatred of abolitionists, and his desire for new honor." Halleck opened the letter by warning McClellan of rumors "that the abolition party had decided to make either [Benjamin] Wade or [Nathaniel] Banks Lieut. Genl." He assured McClellan that he was telling all who would listen "that the whole army had full confidence in you and that if you were superseded by any one, it would be utterly demoralized." Halleck then submitted a plan he had formulated to thwart the abolitionists: "Create the rank of General between the Major Genl and Lieut Genl, and leave the latter as it is, for brevet only." The number of "generals" would be limited to two. "Of course," he added, "you will get the Brevet Lt. Genlship as soon as Richmond is taken.... I will try to come in for a Brevet at the close of the war." (44)

"I hardly know what to say," McClellan replied on March 2. "Why change the European order in the military hierarchy and make a `General' junior to a `Lieut. General'?" He informed Halleck that he had "determined to bide my time--content with my present rank for the present and hoping that Congress would give another grade after marked success." McClellan also assured Halleck that he shared his belief that higher grades than major general were necessary, but thought it would be unseemly to press the matter at the present time. McClellan closed the letter by repeating to Halleck that he wanted the capture of Decatur in collaboration with Buell to be the next objective in the western theater. (45)

This did nothing to warm Halleck to the idea of working with Buell, securing Decatur, or the departmental organization. And in the week after he received McClellan's letter two developments further encouraged his ambition and willingness to disregard the wishes of the general in chief. On March 7 a letter from Stanton arrived at St. Louis asking Halleck for advice on "the limits of a military department that would place all the Western operations you deem expedient under your command." Then, two days later, news of a Union victory at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, reached St. Louis. Secure the winds blew in his favor, Halleck cast aside diplomacy in his dealings with McClellan. "You make a serious mistake," he scolded the commanding general on March 10, "in having three independent commands. There ... never can be any co-operation at the critical moment; all military history proves it." "You will regret your decision against me on this point," he vowed. "Your friendship for individuals has influenced your judgement.... I shall soon fight a great battle on the
Tennessee, unsupported ... if successful, it will settle the campaign in the West.” (46)

When that great battle was fought less than a month later at Shiloh, Halleck would have the authority he so badly desired. On March 11, in part out of a sincere belief that the responsibility of commanding an army in the field and supreme command were too much and partially because of his own growing skepticism of McClellan’s abilities, Lincoln removed the Young Napoleon “from command of the other Military departments ... retaining command of the Department of the Potomac.” All forces west of the Appalachians were then combined into a single Department of the Mississippi with Halleck designated their overall commander. Halleck’s first order of business involved ordering Buell to leave Nashville, where he was preparing a base for operations against East Tennessee, and join Grant at Pittsburg Landing. To take care of East Tennessee, the Lincoln administration conceived a new and, events would demonstrate, horrendously unworkable plan. Fremont, rehabilitated by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, was given command of a new Mountain Department with the expectation that he would organize and lead an expedition south through the Great Valley from western Virginia to Knoxville. (47)

McClellan’s battle with Halleck over the war west of the Appalachians came to an end with the latter triumphant and free to maneuver Union forces in Tennessee unfettered by a higher authority in Washington. This development was an important one in the broader evolution of Union strategy in 1862, which in essence was the story of Halleck and his approach to the war displacing McClellan and his approach. At the end of 1861 the vision that guided the formation of Union grand strategy was the one articulated by Commanding General McClellan: achieve a quick victory by delivering a powerful knockout blow in Virginia and undermining Southern support for the rebellion through a policy of conciliation. Twelve months later, Halleck was general in chief and Lincoln had come to share his skepticism that the North could subdue the South in a quick war. Consequently, by 1863 securing control of the Mississippi River became the first objective of Union arms, as this would be decisive in determining the outcome of the long, drawn-out conflict Halleck had anticipated early on and Lincoln had become more or less resigned to by December 1862. Moreover, by that time the pragmatic policy toward Southern civilians and their property formulated by Halleck and his subordinates in the west governed the conduct of Federal troops in the South. (48)
In November 1861 McClellan inherited a situation where Union forces in Kentucky and Missouri were deficient in professional direction and possessed only a vague sense of their operational objectives. Within a few weeks after his appointment they had new commanders and were integrated into a cogent, comprehensive grand strategy that accommodated political and operational realities and incorporated Federal operations from the Atlantic Coast to the Trans-Mississippi. Yet almost from the moment operations commenced in Kentucky and Tennessee, Halleck began challenging McClellan's authority and quickly found that he was dealing with a commanding general who, although able to deflect his efforts to get control of Buell, was relatively impotent when it came to determining how forces would be maneuvered in Halleck's own department. By late February Halleck decided that he could and would manage his forces in a way consistent with his belief that gaining control of the Mississippi River should be the primary mission of his command, not supporting Buell's operations against East Tennessee, which is what McClellan wanted.

His difficulties in his effort to ensure the implementation of his operational vision in Tennessee and his problems with Halleck in early 1862 were rooted in several factors independent from the well-chronicled deficiencies present in McClellan's or Halleck's personalities. Although personality certainly played a role, any effort to understand the war in the West in early 1862 must also consider McClellan's and Halleck's conflicting views on strategy, Halleck's determination that operations fit his own sense of priorities, and the decline of McClellan's own stature in Washington, which was especially problematic given the institutional weakness of the office of commanding general.

March 11, 1862, did not, of course, mark the end of the McClellan-Halleck relationship. A few months later, Halleck and McClellan would again find themselves working together, this time with Halleck as general in chief and McClellan the less-than-cooperative subordinate. Once again, they would find themselves in conflict and, once again, Halleck would prevail. Eventually, both men would occupy high places on most historians' list of failed Union generals. Certainly, this is a fate that each man believed the other deserved. By the summer of 1862 Halleck had become convinced McClellan was a man who did "not understand strategy and should never plan a campaign." For his part, after the war McClellan would look back on his dealings with Halleck and decide that whoever gave Old Brains his nickname had a fine sense of irony. "Of all the men whom I have encountered in high position Halleck was the most hopelessly stupid," McClellan concluded. "I do not think he ever had a correct military idea from beginning to end." (49)
Earlier versions of this essay were presented to the 2000 Mid-America Conference on History in Lawrence, Kansas, and the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Society for Military History in Madison, Wisconsin. The author would like to express his gratitude to session commentators William G. Piston and William B. Feis for their helpful critiques, and to Charles R. Bowery Jr., Phillip Cuccia, and the two anonymous readers for Civil War History who read later drafts of the essay and provided many useful suggestions for its improvement.


(3.) For two critiques of the tremendous amount of attention historians have devoted to McClellan’s personality in particular, see Joseph L. Harsh, “On the McClellan-Go-Round,” Civil War History 19 (June 1973): 101-18, and Rowland, George B. McClellan and Civil War History, 45-75. For a prime example of the tendency of scholars of Civil War command relations to place a heavy emphasis on personalities, which goes so far as to explicitly employ psychoanalysis in its effort to explain McClellan, see Joseph T. Glatthaar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War (New York: Free Press, 1994), esp. 237-42.
(4.) McClellan to Cameron, [Oct. 31, 1861], in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 115-18.


(11.) In his memoirs, McClellan recalled that Edwin Stanton, who had crossed swords with Halleck before the war, warned him in the fall of 1861 that Old Brains was "probably the greatest scoundrel and most barefaced villain in America ... totally destitute of principle," McClellan, McClellan's Own Story, 137; McClellan to Halleck, Nov. 11, 1861, in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 130-31.


(13.) Grimsley, Hard Hand of War, 2-3, 8-n, 33, 63-64; Engle, Don Carlos Buell, 76-81.
McClellan to Buell, Nov. 7, 12, 1861, in Sears, ed. Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 125-26, 131-32. The need to rescue the people of East Tennessee weighed on Lincoln and McClellan in part due to the constant harassment to which they were subjected by two men from the region then in Washington whose Unionist stands made them heroes to the North, Congressman Horace Maynard and Senator Andrew Johnson. See Engle, Don Carlos Buell, 89, 100-01, 112, 117-18, 136, and Reed, Combined Operations, 65-66.


Engle, Don Carlos Buell, 85; Headquarters, Department of the Ohio, General Orders No. 1, Nov. 15, 1861, OR, vol. 4:358; Edward D. Townsend to Buell, Nov. 16, 1861, ibid., 359; Buell to McClellan, Nov. 22, 1861, ibid., vol. 7: 443-44; Buell to McClellan, Nov. 23, 1861, ibid., 445; McClellan to Buell, Nov. 25, 27, 1861, ibid., 447, 450.

Buell to McClellan, Nov. 27, 1861, OR, vol. 7: 450-52.

McClellan to Buell, Nov. 29, 1861, OR, vol. 7: 457-58.

Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, Nov. 19, 1861, OR, vol. 8: 369; Halleck to McClellan, Nov. 28, Dec. 6, 1861, ibid., 389-90, 408-10.


Grimsley, Hard Hand of War, 49; Ambrose, Halleck, 13; Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, General Orders No. 3, Nov. 20, 1861, OR, vol. 8:370; General Orders No. 8, Nov. 26, 1861, ibid., 380-81.

Grimsley, Hard Hand of War, 50-51.


(25.) Ives to James Gordon Bennett, Jan. 15, 1862, James Gordon Bennett Papers, LC, container 1\reel 1.

(26.) McClellan to Stanton, [Jan. 26, 1862], in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 158; Scott to Stanton, Feb. 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 17, 1862, Edwin McMasters Stanton Papers, LC, container 2\reel 1, container 3\reel z; Stanton to Scott, Feb. 21, 1862, ibid., container 4\reel z; Abraham Lincoln, President's General War Order No. 1, Jan. 27, 1862, in Basler, ed., Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 5:111-12; Nathaniel Banks to Seth Williams, Feb. 12, 14, 16, 1862, McClellan Papers, LC, A40\reel 16, A41\reel 17; Joseph Hooker to Williams, Feb. 12, 16, 1862, ibid., A40\reel 16; George H. Taylor to Williams, Feb. 12, 1862, ibid.; Fitz John Porter to Williams, Feb. 13, 14, 1862, ibid.; William B. Franklin to Williams, Feb. 14, 17, 1862, ibid., A41\reel 17; Winfield Scott Hancock to Williams, Feb. 14, 1862, ibid.


(28.) McClellan to Halleck, [Jan. 29, 1862], in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 159-60; Ambrose, Halleck, 24; Halleck to Grant, Jan. 30, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 572; Halleck to McClellan, Jan. 30, Feb. 6, 1862, ibid., 572, 587; McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 6, 1862, ibid., 587; McClellan to Buell, Feb. 6, 1862, ibid., 587; Buell to McClellan, Feb. 6, 1862, ibid., pp. 587-88; Halleck to Buell, Jan. 30, 31, Feb. 1, 6, 1862, ibid., 574, 576, 588; Buell to Halleck, Jan. 30, 31, Feb. 6, 1862, ibid., 574, 588-89.

(29.) McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 6, 1862, in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 171-72; McClellan to Buell, [Feb. 6, 1862], ibid., 172; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 7, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 590, 590-92; McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 7, 1862, ibid., 591.
[30.] Buell to McClellan, Feb. 7, 8, 10, 14, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 593, 594, 601-02, 612; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 8, 10, 1862, ibid., 594, 595, 599; Halleck to Buell, Feb. 11, 12, 13, 1862, ibid., 605, 607, 609; Halleck to Foote, Feb. 11, 1862, ibid., 604; McClellan to Buell, Feb. 13, 1862, ibid., 609. For the best and most thorough description of Union operations against Forts Henry and Donelson, see Benjamin Franklin Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).


[33.] Buell to McClellan, Feb. 15, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 619-20; McClellan to Buell, Feb. 15, 16, 1862, ibid., 620, 626.

[34.] Halleck to Buell, Feb. 15, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 621-22; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 16, 1862, ibid., 624-25; Grant to Halleck, Feb. 16, 1862, ibid., 159-60, 625; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 17, 1862, ibid., 628.

[35.] Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 19, 20, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 636, 641; Halleck to Buell, Feb. 18, 1862, ibid., 632; McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 20, 21, 1862, ibid., 640, 645; McClellan to Buell, Feb. 20, 21, 1862, ibid., 640, 645, 646.

[36.] Sears, George B. McClellan, 139; Reed, Combined Operations in the Civil War, 88-89.

[37.] Sears, George B. McClellan, 139, 153.


[39.] Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 298 n. 23; Weigley, History of the United States Army, 246-50.
(40.) McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 20, 21, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 640, 645; Halleck to Stanton, Feb. 23, 1862, ibid., 655; Buell to McClellan, Feb. 26, 1862, ibid., 425; Halleck to Pope, Feb. 18, 1862, ibid., 74; McClellan to Halleck, Jan. 29, 1862, in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 159; Brooks D. Simpson, Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 121-25; Ambrose, Halleck, 34, 36-37; Engle, Don Carlos Buell, 176-78.

(41.) McClellan to Halleck, Feb. 24, 1862, in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 190; McClellan to Halleck, March 2, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 678; McClellan to Buell, Mar. 2, 1862, ibid.

(42.) Buell to McClellan, Mar. 3, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 679.

(43.) Ambrose, Halleck, 34-37; Halleck to McClellan, Mar. 3, 4, 1862, OR, vol. 7: 670-80, 682; Halleck to Lincoln, June 5, 1862, ibid., vol. 17, part 2: 71-72. By March 1863, Halleck was even more certain of his assessment of strategic priorities, proclaiming to General Grant that the opening of the Mississippi River “will be to us of more advantage than the capture of forty Richmonds.” Halleck to Grant, Mar. 20, 1863, ibid., vol. 24, pt. 1: 22.

(44.) Ambrose, Halleck, 35; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 24, 1862, McClellan Papers, A42\reel 17.

(45.) McClellan to Halleck, March 3, 1862, in Sears, ed., Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 196-97.

(46.) Stanton to Halleck, March 7, 1862, OR, vol. 8: 596; Samuel R. Curtis to Joseph Kelton, March 9, 1862, ibid., 191-93; Halleck to Curtis, Mar. 10, 1862, ibid., 193; Halleck to McClellan, Mar. 10, 1862, ibid., 190-91, 602.


(49.) Ambrose, Halleck, 68; McClellan, McClellan’s Own Story, 137.
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