

Civil War

McClelland's Recruiting Drive

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Three lawyers — President Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Maj. Gen. John Alexander McClelland — stirred up a strange cocktail of military plans in the fall of 1862.

McClelland was the chief mixer but he had willing helpers in Lincoln and Stanton. He was a political general with a fair combat record at Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh but he was dead set against West Pointers.

He was 50 years old in 1862. His career before he became a general had been in politics. He was a member of the Illinois legislature and later a congressman. He was a dedicated War Democrat and it was largely on that score that Lincoln made him a general early in the war.

He and Lincoln were political friends despite the difference in parties so it was easy enough for McClelland to get the President's ear in late September 1862.

McClelland had a plan. He would return to the Middle West and begin recruiting an army to clear the Mississippi River of Confederates.

Able Recruiter

McClelland was an able recruiter and had proved it. His chief objective was to be Vicksburg, Miss., a Rebel stronghold lightly defended at the time. First he asked for 20,000 troops and later jumped the figure to 60,000.

Implicit in his plan was that the commander of this expedition would be General McClelland, operating independently and reporting only to Washington.

Vicksburg was in the territory of Maj. Gen. U.S. Grant — at least Grant considered it so. He was the only officer in the vicinity who was senior to McClelland. Grant had his eyes on Vicksburg, too. As early as July 1862 he had started laying plans for its capture but by fall he had not been able to accomplish even a start.

McClelland had two motives in mind.

One was a desire to show the country that a citizen-general could get on with the war in the West where a West Pointer could not. West Pointers were trying to win the war by strategy rather than by fighting, he believed. Another consideration which undoubtedly ran through his mind was that the capture of Vicksburg likely would be a hero and that meant votes.

Based on Soundings

McClelland's second motive was based on soundings taken at Middle Western grassroots.

Before the Civil War, the surplus grain and meat of the Middle West went down the Mississippi for sale — a cheap method of transportation that made a profit for the producers.

Now that the Confederates had closed off the river, the Middle West's grain and meat must go east to market by railroad and to some extent by the Great Lakes. Rail barons seized the opportunity to raise freight rates. Westerners resented it, considered themselves as being strangled and reacted by sending more anti-war men to Congress. This could lead to a new political party, willing perhaps to grant Southern independence in order to reopen the Mississippi, even to secession of the region, the reasoning went.

Whatever the merits of this reasoning, it bulked large at the moment to Indians, Illinoisans, Ohioans and Iowans.

Other besides McClelland were thinking along these lines also, so McClelland's plan against Vicksburg, which promised direct action and more troops for the western armies — both valuable considerations — fell on fertile ground in Washington and sprouted.

On Oct. 26, Stanton gave McClelland an order marked "confidential." Nowadays it would be stamped "to secret."

To Organize Troops

The order specified that McClelland was to go to Illinois, Indiana and Iowa "to organize the troops remaining in those states and to be raised by volunteering and draft, and forward them with all dispatch to Memphis, Cairo or such points as may be hereafter designated by the general-in-chief, to the end that, when a sufficient force not required by the operations of General Grant's command shall be raised, an expedition may be organized under General McClelland's command against Vicksburg, and to clear the Mississippi River and open navigation to New Orleans."

The force so organized will remain subject to the design-

nation of the general-in-chief and such exigencies as the service in his judgment may require."

Although Lincoln and Stanton were topflight lawyers and undoubtedly could have drawn an airtight order if

they had wished, the document contained a loophole big enough to drive an army wagon through.

Free To Move

If Grant did not need McClelland's men and if Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, gen-

eral-in-chief approved — then McClelland was free to move on Vicksburg with whatever troops remained.

Officially Halleck knew nothing of the order. Actually he knew all about it as his later actions would prove.

Grant knew nothing of it, officially or unofficially, except for rumors.

The upshot of this strange concoction, in which the left hand of the government did not know what the right hand was doing, resulted in West Pointers Grant and Halleck — heretofore something less than friendly — moving closer together in the face of attack.

McClelland, his order in hand, was back in Springfield, Ill., by the end of October enlisting the aid of Gov. Richard Yates. He also saw Gov. Oliver P. Morton of Indiana and Gov. Samuel J. Kirkwood of Iowa.

By Nov. 10 he had sent 20 regiments of infantry and two batteries from these three states. Halleck saw to it that the troops went to Columbus, Ky., Grant's territory.

Grant, reading newspaper reports of McClelland's recruiting activities, was growing restless. He knew something was going on behind his back but had no way to find out what and Halleck could not tell him.

On Nov. 10, Grant, apparently trying to smoke out some firm information, messaged Halleck:

"Am I to understand that I lie still here while an expedition is fitted out from Memphis, or do you want me to push as far south as possible?"

"You have command of all troops sent to your department and have permission to fight the enemy where you please," Halleck replied, answering only by implication.

Somewhat encouraged, Grant began preparations to move south against Vicksburg.

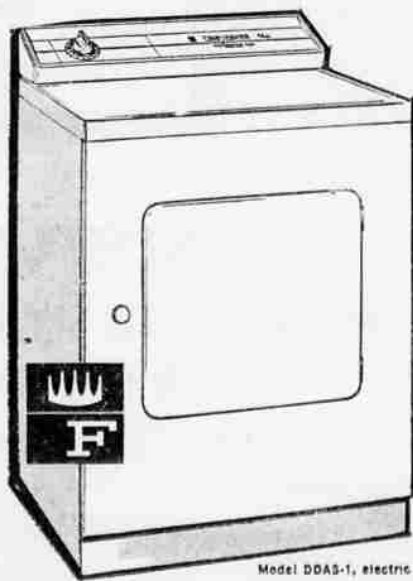
But much water would flow past Vicksburg before it was captured — by Grant, not McClelland.



RECRUITING PLAN—In 1862, Maj. Gen. John Alexander McClelland was 50 years old, was a political general with a fair combat record, and had a plan. He would return to his native Middle West, and recruit an army to clear Mississippi of Confederates. He had two motives in mind: First was a desire to show the country that a citizen-general could get on with the war where a West Pointer could not. Second, he felt that the capture of Vicksburg likely would be a hero, and that meant votes. But Maj. Gen. U.S. Grant, senior officer in the area, also had his eye on Vicksburg. He questioned McClelland's actions, and somewhat discouraged by his reply from Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, prepared to move south. Here, from the Library of Congress collection, is a drawing of McClelland.

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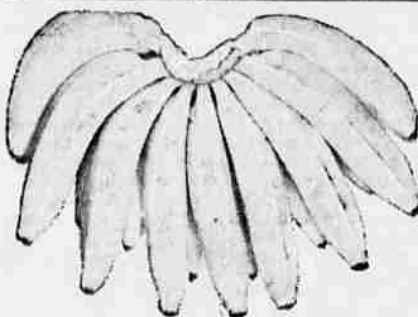
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