

LINCOLN AND McCLELLAN:
WASHINGTON, D.C., NOVEMBER 1862

Orville H. Browning:
Diary, November 29, 1862

President Lincoln replaced George B. McClellan with Ambrose Burnside as commander of the Army of the Potomac on November 5, 1862. He later talked about McClellan with Senator Orville H. Browning, an old friend from Illinois. In their conversation Browning blamed the Republican losses in the recent midterm elections on the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued on September 22, and on Lincoln's proclamation of September 24 suspending the writ of habeas corpus throughout the nation. The allegations Lincoln mentions regarding General Fitz John Porter's conduct at the second battle of Bull Run resulted in Porter being dismissed from the army in January 1863.

Saturday Nov 29, 1862 Sheffield arrived this morning before breakfast. At 12 I called on the President. He was apparently very glad to see me, and received me with much cordiality. We had a long familiar talk. When speaking of the result of the recent elections I told him that his proclamations had been disastrous to us. That prior to issuing them all loyal people were united in support of the war and the administration. That the masses of the democratic party were satisfied with him, and warmly supporting him, and that their disloyal leaders could not rally them in opposition—They had no issue without taking ground against the war, and upon that we would annihilate them. But the proclamations had revived old party issues—given them a rallying cry—capitol to operate upon and that we had the results in our defeat. To this he made no reply.

I added that the Republican party could not put down the rebellion—that no party could do it—that it required a union of all loyal men in the free states to give us success, and that without that union we must disastrously fail. To all this he fully assented.

I asked him whether Genl Pope was a failure, or whether he had been sacrificed by the bad faith of his officers. He replied that he knew no reason to suspect any one of bad faith except Fitz John Porter, and that he very much hoped an investigation would relieve him from suspicion, but that at present he believed his disobedience of orders, and his failure to go to Popes aid in the battle of Friday had occasioned our defeat, and deprived us of a victory which would have terminated the war. That all Popes orders, and all his movements had met with the full approval of Genl Halleck and himself with one exception. That during the conflict between Popes and the rebel army, he Pope, had placed a portion of his army in a position, which he pointed out to me on the map, which alarmed him, but that no bad results followed—in fact it had turned out fortunately

That after the last battle fought by Pope the army was much demoralized, and it was feared the enemy would be down on Washington. In this emergency he had called McClellan here to take upon him the defence of the City—That he soon brought order out of chaos, and got the army in good condition. That for such work McClellan had great talents—Indeed for organizing, disciplining and preparing an army for the field and handling it in the field he was superior to any of our Genls That when the rebels crossed into Maryland he sent for Burnside and told him he must take command of our army, march against the enemy and give him battle. Burnside declined—said the responsibility was too great—the consequences of defeat too momentous—he was willing to command a Corps under McClellan, but was not willing to take the chief command of the army—hence McClellan was reinstated. The battles of South Mountain and Antietam were fought with ability—as well as any Genl could have fought them, but McClellan was too slow in his movements. He could and ought to have prevented the loss of Harper's Ferry, but was six days marching 40 miles, and it was surrendered. He did not follow up his advantages after Antietam. The army of the enemy should have been annihilated, but it was permitted to recross the Potomac without the loss of a man, and McClellan would not follow. He coaxed, urged & ordered him, but all would not do. At the expiration of two weeks after a peremptory order to that effect

he had only 3/4 of his army across the River, and was six days doing that, whereas the rebel army had effected a crossing in one day

He concluded as he has in all the conversations I have had with him about McClellan by saying that his great defect was his excess of caution I asked him about what Butler told me in Springfield that Fitz John Porter & Genl Griffing had sent a despatch to McClellan to hold on, that they had Pope where they could ruin, and that this despatch was in the Presidents hands—He said there was no shadow of foundation for such a story and no truth in it. I asked him about Burnside's army before Fredericksburg, and whether it was likely soon to accomplish any thing. He answered that Burnside was now here consulting upon that subject—That he and Halleck had just left the room as I entered. That to get at the enemy he had to cross the Rappahannock, and that to cross in the face of an opposing army was very hazardous, especially as he did not know its strength, and could not ascertain it. They had just been debating whether to move immediately, or whether to wait a few days till some collateral movement could be made to create a diversion which would render the passage less difficult, and that the question would be decided to day Burnside had then gone with Halleck and would receive his final orders before he left him.

Sheffield arrived this morning, and Cowan at night. Also Giffin and his wife