GENERAL HANCOCK:
SOLDIER OF THE GILDED AGE

BY JOHN M. TAYLOR*

WHEN the Civil War finally came to a close, the Northern armies had few brighter luminaries than General Winfield Scott Hancock. As a young brigadier in the Peninsula campaign he had won from McClellan the accolade, “Hancock was Superb!”—and to the end of his days was to his comrades the Superb Hancock. At Gettysburg it was Hancock who commanded the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge, and was carried wounded from the field only after the final repulse of Pickett’s charge.

As commander of the II Corps, Hancock gained new laurels during 1864. At Spotsylvania, Hancock’s corps broke the Confederate lines at the Salient, and came within a narrow margin of splitting Lee’s army in two. His contemporaries testified without restraint concerning Hancock’s magnetic presence on the battlefield. The corps commander stood well over six feet, was an outstanding horseman, and never permitted the heat of battle to disturb his fastidious dress.

Hancock’s personal qualities added to his reputation with the army and the general public. So generous was Hancock towards less fortunate comrades that, when he died, a public campaign had to be launched on behalf of his widow. Except on the battlefield, where his profanity impressed even seasoned campaigners, Hancock was a model of congeniality. In times of peace he was the army’s most inveterate tree-planter. So astute an observer as Gideon Welles recognized Hancock as a prime political prospect; Welles confided to his diary in 1868 that “Hancock seems a fair man,” and added his belief that the Pennsylvanian was “better liked” by the public than Grant.1

For Hancock there was only one career: the army. A West Point graduate, he had not followed the example of fellow-grad-

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uates such as Grant and George B. McClellan in exchanging the
tedium of garrison life for commercial pursuits. But Hancock’s
upbringing had made him more politically aware than many of
his military contemporaries.

Hancock’s father had been a middle-class lawyer in Norristow, Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin Hancock passed on to his son a strict constructionist’s reverence for the Constitution, and the end of the Civil War found the son sensitive to the issues of Re-
construction. Hancock’s views on the subject paralleled those of Lincoln—for whom he had voted in 1864, despite a close personal friendship with McClellan. In Hancock’s view the war had settled forever the issue of secession, and the erstwhile Confederate states, once readmitted to the Union, were on the same footing as the loyal states.

Midway through his term President Andrew Johnson turned to Hancock as a commander for one of the Southern military dis-
tricts set up under the Reconstruction Act. Of these districts, none was more obstreperous than the Fifth, comprising Louisiana and Texas. In New Orleans, Northern agitators had stimulated Negro demonstrations which, when left uncontrolled, erupted into bloody race riots. Emissaries sent south by Johnson, in reporting to the President, emphasized the role played by carpetbag orators and urged the removal of the district commander, the blustering Phil Sheridan.

Hancock reported to New Orleans in the fall of 1867, in the face of a warning from Grant that he should not accept the ap-
pointment. On November 29, he issued his first order as district commander:

The General Commanding is gratified to learn that peace and quiet reign in this department. It will be his purpose to preserve this condition of things. As a means to this great end he requires the maintenance of the civil au-
thorities. . . . The right of trial by jury, the habeas corpus, the liberty of the press, the freedom of speech, the natural rights of persons, and the rights of property must be preserved. . . .

Free institutions, while they are essential to the pros-
perity and happiness of the people, always furnish the strongest inducements to peace and order. Crimes and offenses committed in this district must be left to the consideration and judgment of the regular civil tribunals,
and those tribunals will be supported in their lawful jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{2}

General Order No. 40, as it was titled, was the fruition of Benjamin Hancock's early teachings. The order made his son a hero to the South; gifts and letters poured into Hancock's residence. Meanwhile, the General Commanding set out to demonstrate that he meant what he said. Local officials who had been summarily removed by Sheridan were restored to their posts; military orders which had made a mockery of trial by jury were revoked. The once-privileged position of carpetbaggers evaporated as Hancock put the weight of his office behind the local courts.

But Hancock lacked support in Washington where the President had been rendered ineffectual by Congress. In February, when Hancock removed nine members of the New Orleans city council for overstepping their powers, Grant telegraphed from Washington that they were to be restored. In vain Hancock protested, asking that he be given a hearing and telegraphing in detail the reasons for his action. Grant refused, adding the suggestion that "despatches of such length as yours should be sent by mail, when there is not a greater necessity for prompt reply than seems to exist in this case."\textsuperscript{3}

In early February, Johnson sent a special message to Congress, praising Hancock's program in New Orleans. On February 27, however, Grant ordered the dismissal of the councilmen appointed by Hancock, and two weeks later Hancock was directed to return to Washington. To many Southerners, Hancock's ouster came as a personal tragedy. His short, stormy tenure served to underscore the impotence of Northern conservatives in the face of a Radical Congress. The \textit{New Orleans Times} editorialized: "No man ever won more completely the confidence of a community, and no man could possibly carry with him, in fuller degree, the blessings and good wishes of a grateful people."\textsuperscript{4}

This latter-day "Battle of New Orleans" resulted in an estrangement between Hancock and Grant which ended only when Hancock called on the dying Grant at Mt. MacGregor nearly two decades later. Its immediate effect, however, was to make Hancock

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1}Francis A. Walker, \textit{General Hancock} (New York, 1894), pp. 297-298.
\item \textsuperscript{2}Quoted in Almira R. Hancock, \textit{Reminiscences of Winfield Scott Hancock} (New York, 1887), p. 130.
\item \textsuperscript{3}\textit{New Orleans Times}, March 17, 1868.
\end{itemize}
a hot political prospect. Without even making a serious run for the nomination, he almost became the Democratic presidential candidate against Grant. In the 1868 convention Hancock at one point led all contenders with 144 votes, 68 short of the required two-thirds majority. But Hancock had no support from the Tammany Hall delegation, and the prize eventually went to a New Yorker, Horatio Seymour.

Hancock spent the years of the Grant administration mostly in chasing Indians on the Western plains. In 1875 he was assigned to the military court of inquiry charged with investigating Grant's personal secretary, General Orville Babcock. Benjamin Bristow, Grant's Secretary of the Treasury, had unearthed a major administration scandal, the Whiskey Ring. Evidence of large-scale evasions of the excise tax on whiskey had led inexorably to the dashing General Babcock.

Babcock demanded a military court, probably anticipating that it would be stacked with friends of the administration. As finally constituted, the court comprised two such "friends," Generals Sheridan and Alfred Terry, but also Hancock.

Even before entraining for Chicago, where the court was to be held, Hancock questioned whether a military tribunal could have jurisdiction in a case already pending in the civil courts. On the first day of the inquiry, Hancock made his position clear:

A sense of duty to the laws of the military service and to the accused, impels me to ask your concurrence in a postponement of the Inquiry for the present. We are all bound to believe in the innocence of Colonel Babcock, and the presumption cannot be repelled without evidence. . . . Can we compel the production of these while they are wanted for the purposes of this trial at St. Louis? Certainly not, if the military be, as the Constitution declares, subordinate to the civil authorities. Shall we proceed and without evidence give an opinion in ignorance of the facts? That cannot be the wish of anybody.  

While Hancock's solicitude for Babcock may be questioned, his argument nonetheless carried the day. A flurry of telegrams ended with the adjournment of the military inquiry; the civil trial at

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6 Hancock, Reminiscences, pp. 148-149.
St. Louis went on until a personal deposition from Grant brought about Babcock's acquittal. Hancock was only occasionally in the public eye in the years immediately after New Orleans, and the circumstances were not always such as to improve his political prospects. By 1877 he was back in the East, where as commander of the Division of the Atlantic it fell upon him to put down riots engendered by the railroad strike of that year. Business was bad, and in the summer of 1877 most Eastern railroads decreed an across-the-board pay slash for all employees. For a while, sullen discontent characterized operations at the major rail terminals. Then, in mid-July, Baltimore and Ohio crews at Martinsburg went on strike, and drove off company-hired replacements. When the strikers fired on state militia, the governor appealed to President Rutherford B. Hayes for assistance.

In West Virginia, Hayes placed Division of the Atlantic troops under the governor's jurisdiction. Similar action was contemplated for Pennsylvania, but here Governor John F. Hartranft admitted doubts as to his ability to handle the spreading violence. At this point Hayes suggested that Hancock take personal command of all troops in the state. Hancock, characteristically, urged restraint, and Hayes did not press the point. Eventually, order was restored by federal troops operating under the Governor's jurisdiction.

To Hancock, resolution of the legal issue on a basis compatible with state sovereignty outweighed any social significance which might be attributed to the strike. Lest his attitude be equated with that of certain Southern governors today, however, it should be noted that the President, Governor Hartranft, and Hancock were cooperating to maintain order. The only legal issue concerned the magnitude of federal intervention required. To General John M. Schofield, Hancock wrote: "It was the moral force of the United States Government that was displayed. . . . The presence of the troops had a powerful effect."

Hancock's "hard line" during the period of the strikes underscored his unwillingness to curry popular favor for political purposes. In any case, the greying and portly Hancock of the late 1870's bore only a passing resemblance to the dashing

1Hancock to Schofield, July 30, 1877, Schofield Mss., Library of Congress.
“Superb” of the Peninsula campaign. It is noteworthy under the circumstances that a hard core of admirers continued to work for his nomination for the Presidency. To this dedicated group, Samuel Tilden’s announced unwillingness to seek the Democratic nomination put Hancock very much in the running.

When the Democratic convention met in Cincinnati in July, 1880, Hancock seized the lead on the first ballot. Although the New York delegation was again unenthusiastic, Hancock was nominated by acclamation on the second ballot. As his running-mate against the Republican ticket of James A. Garfield and Chester Arthur, the convention chose a wealthy political unknown, William H. English of Indiana.

The Democratic ticket faced an uphill fight. The Hayes administration had gone far in retrieving the GOP from the mire in which it had been left by President Grant. Times were good. In Garfield the Republicans had a standard-bearer who was a popular member of the House of Representatives, and—even more important—a skilled conciliator of differences within his party. Finally, the Republicans had developed a grass-roots political organization which, while quarrelsome in repose, retained a well-demonstrated capacity to unite in times of peril.

The campaign of 1880 saw the full flowering of the “front porch” campaign. Garfield’s front porch was in Mentor, Ohio, Hancock’s at Governor’s Island in New York Harbor. Although Hancock maintained a heavy correspondence with party leaders, his attitude towards the campaign was strangely remote. In contrast to Garfield, who left his front porch when it became necessary to placate the GOP leadership in New York State, there is no evidence that Hancock made his influence felt on the local level. On September 14, Hancock wrote to Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin with almost Olympian detachment:

I have requested that your Indianapolis speech be distributed throughout the country. I believe it treats nearly all the leading questions: but if on revision you find that you did not cover all the vital issues, I take the liberty of suggesting that you seize an opportunity to do so, in order that the record of this campaign may be valuable in history. . . . I intend in the foregoing remark not to depreciate [your labors], but to indicate the obligation you are under . . . to treat the great govern-
mental questions at issue, for the benefit of our countrymen and hereafter.\footnote{Hancock to Doolittle, September 14, 1880, Author's Collection.}

As the campaign went on, the Republicans introduced an issue of which Hancock did not approve. The Democratic platform had advocated a tariff "for revenue only"—a plank which the GOP assiduously called to the attention of protection-conscious businessmen. For the first time the tariff made its appearance as a major campaign issue. A speech in which Hancock characterized the tariff as a local rather than a national issue failed to satisfy the protectionists.

When the ballots were counted on November 2, Garfield won 215 electoral votes to 155 for Hancock. The election had turned on New York, where disunity among the Democrats cost Hancock the election. In terms of popular vote, Garfield's plurality was among the smallest of any presidential election—some 10,000 votes out of over 9,000,000 cast.

Hancock himself did not wait up for the late returns. In his wife's words:

At 7 o'clock, p.m., on the day of the election, he yielded to the extreme weariness and prostration which ensued from his five months' labors and went to bed, begging me under no circumstances to disturb him, as the result would be known sooner or later, and to-morrow would be time enough. At 5 o'clock on the following morning he inquired of me the news. I replied, "It has been a complete Waterloo for you." "That is all right," said he, "I can stand it," and in another moment he was again asleep.\footnote{Hancock, Reminiscences, p. 172.}

If Hancock was not ambitious for himself, the self-control here evidenced is nonetheless deceptive. For he felt strongly about the issues as he saw them, and longed to avenge the Republican "theft" of the Presidency in 1876. Four years after his defeat Hancock wrote to Senator Doolittle:

I understood the democratic campaign of 1880 to have for its purpose: the restoration of privity of elections, the return to simplicity and economy in the public business, the reestablishment of harmony, mutual confidence
and prosperity throughout the different parts of the country, the purification of the fountains of justice & generally, the impartial, faithful and efficient administration of the government.\(^6\)

Respecting the tariff, Hancock wrote that he had never referred to it as a “local issue,” but that he did not object to having the term ascribed to him.

I . . . did not hesitate in conversation, as well as in some formal ways, to express my views upon the tariff when I felt called upon to do so; it is a question, as I said at the time, which affects localities differently; and as the people in the various Congressional districts elect Members of Congress to represent their interests, the original presentation and discussion of this question should occur among the people of the various localities when choosing their Representatives in Congress.\(^9\)

Following the campaign, Hancock returned cheerfully to his army duties. In 1878 he had helped to found the Military Service Institution of the United States, and became its first president. Not since Jefferson’s day had there been a professional society for army and navy officers, and the Civil War had brought a quickening of interest in the military profession. Hancock put in long hours on behalf of the institution, which maintained its library and museum on Governor’s Island.

Throughout his postwar career Hancock had maintained a friendly correspondence with General William T. Sherman, who occasionally had interceded with Grant on Hancock’s behalf. The friendship with Sherman was sufficiently firm to survive at least one pointed letter which Sherman wrote Hancock in 1881 concerning soldiers and politics. Replied Hancock:

I have received your letter of the first inst. stating that you are often embarrassed in military details by a want of positive knowledge of the ultimate purposes and intentions of your subordinate Generals. . . . I can assure you that my purposes and intentions have been and still are to serve the Government of the United States faithfully and to the best of my ability. . . . But

\(^6\) Hancock to Doolittle. April 2, 1884, Author’s Collection.

\(^9\) Ibid.
you ask, how can you stand between me and political action? . . . I must in justice to you and myself let you understand clearly that, referring to my public career, I retract nothing which I have said and apologise for nothing I have done. . . .

If the danger you apprehend materialized alike for all officers who take any part whatever in political affairs, I could understand it. But I judge from your letter that only those who have opposed the party in power are in peril, while those—some in high rank, who have taken an open and active part in support of that party—are to pass without penalty.11

When Hancock died, on February 8, 1886, tributes came from all over: from President Grover Cleveland, Samuel Tilden, Phil Sheridan, and Joseph E. Johnston. The obituaries generally emphasized his military exploits, for the country was still refighting the Civil War. Some observers were more perceptive. Secretary of State Thomas A. Bayard paid tribute to a soldier who, "like Washington, never forgot he was also a citizen."12

Respecting the analogy with Washington, a not-unfriendly cynic remarked that Hancock was "second in war, second in peace." For Hancock, despite his excellence, had never exercised an independent command during the war, and had fallen just short of election to the Presidency.

With few exceptions, Hancock's postwar career was a succession of rebuffs. His effort to restore civil rule to Louisiana and Texas was short-lived. His breach with Grant brought him a series of undesirable military assignments. Himself one of the most generous of men, Hancock's legalistic approach to the railroad strikes of 1877 did nothing to increase his popularity.

The fact is that Hancock's honest conservatism was an anachronism in the Gilded Age. He was out of place in an era of backroom politics and private railway coaches, and left so small an estate that wealthy friends, including Samuel J. Tilden, launched a subscription campaign on behalf of Mrs. Hancock, which eventually realized $55,000.13

Politically, Hancock had much in common with Grover Cleveland. Each was staunchly conservative and not overly imaginative,
but possessed of qualities of character which commanded wide respect. It is notable that a sentence from Hancock's acceptance speech of 1880—"A public office is a trust"—would become the byword of Cleveland's successful campaign four years later.

Many factors contributed to Hancock's defeat in the campaign of 1880, but the candidate himself cannot be absolved from blame. The magnetism which had inspired his corps on the battlefield did not carry over into the political arena. He was unable to resolve factional bickering among Democrats in New York state, and lost the election as a result. Yet he was one of the few public figures of the era who never forfeited the admiration of his contemporaries, and when Hancock died thousands agreed with ex-President Hayes that

If, when we make up our estimate of a public man, conspicuous both as a soldier and in civil life, we are to think first and chiefly of his manhood, his integrity, his purity, his singleness of purpose, and his unselfish devotion to duty, we can truthfully say that he was through and through pure gold.¹⁴