

IMPORTANT LETTER OF SECRETARY OF
WAR, HON. E. M. STANTON, WRITTEN IN
1862.

Contributed by JAMES M. SWANK.

The reader whose memory goes back to the early days of the civil war in this country will remember the reason given by General George B. McClellan for the failure of the Peninsular campaign in 1862. He said that troops whose assistance he needed, under the command of General McDowell, were withheld from him. This reason was repeated in the House of Representatives in 1886 by General Joseph Wheeler, of Alabama, and in a way which gave great offense to the friends of Secretary Stanton, who died a few years after the close of the war. On June 8, 1886, Hon. William D. Kelley, of Pennsylvania, replied to General Wheeler, producing and reading the following letter which the Secretary had written on May 18, 1862, to an old and intimate personal friend, the Rev. Heman Dyer, D.D., an Episcopal clergyman:

“WASHINGTON, D. C., May 18, 1862.

“My Dear Friend: Yours of the 10th is welcomed as an evidence of the continued regard of one whose esteem I have always been anxious to possess. I have been very well aware of the calumnies busily circulated against me in New York and elsewhere respecting my relations to General McClellan, but am compelled from public considerations to withhold the proofs that would stamp the falsehood of the accusations and the base motives of the accusers, who belong to two classes. First. Plunderers who have been driven from the Department when they were gorging millions. Second. Scheming politicians, whose designs are endangered by an earnest, resolute, and uncompromising prosecution of this war as a war against rebels and traitors. A brief statement of facts on official record, which I can make to you confidentially, will be sufficient to satisfy yourself that your confidence in me has not been misplaced.

90 *Letter of Secretary of War, Hon. E. M. Stanton.*

"First. When I entered the Cabinet I was and had been for months the sincere and devoted friend of General McClellan, and to support him, and so far as I might aid and assist him in bringing the war to a close, was a chief inducement for me to sacrifice my personal happiness to a sense of public duty. I had studied him earnestly with an anxious desire to discover the military and patriotic virtue that might save the country, and if in any degree disappointed I had hoped on and waited for time to develop.

"I went into the Cabinet about the 20th of January. On the 27th the President made his Order No. 1, requiring the Army of the Potomac to move. It is not necessary, or perhaps proper, to state all the causes which led to that order, but it is enough to know that the Government was on the verge of bankruptcy, and at the rate of expenditure the armies must move or the Government perish. The 22d of February was the day fixed for movement, and when it arrived there was no more sign of movement on the Potomac than there had been for three months before. Many, very many, earnest conversations I had held with General McClellan, to impress him with the absolute necessity of active operations or that the Government would fail because of foreign intervention and enormous debt.

"Between the 22d of February and the 8th of March the President had again interfered, and a movement on Winchester and to clear the blockade of the Potomac was promised, commenced, and abandoned. The circumstances can not yet be revealed. On the 8th of March the President again interfered, ordered the Army of the Potomac to be organized into army corps, and that operations should commence.

"Two lines of operations were open—one moving directly on the enemy at Manassas and forcing him back on Richmond, beating and destroying him by superior force, and all the time keeping the Capital secure by lying between it and the enemy. This was the plan favored by the President. The other plan was to transfer the troops by water to some point on the lower Chesapeake, and thence advance on Richmond. This was General McClellan's plan. The President yielded his own views, although they were supported by some of the best military men in the country, and consented that the general should pursue his own plans. But by a written order he imposed the special condition that the army should not be removed without leaving a sufficient force in and around Washington to make the Capital perfectly secure against all danger, and that the force required should be determined by the judgment of all the commanders of the army corps.

"In order to enable General McClellan to devote his whole energy to the movement of his own army, (which was quite enough to tax the ability of the ablest commander in the world,) he was relieved from the charge of the other military departments, it being supposed that the respective commanders were competent to direct the operations in their own departments. To enable General McClellan to

transport his force every means and power of the Government were placed at his disposal and unsparingly used. When a large part of his force had been transferred to Fortress Monroe, and the whole of it about to go in a few days, information was given to me by various persons that there was great reason to fear that no adequate force had been left to defend the Capital in case of sudden attack; that the enemy might detach a large force and seize it at a time when it would be impossible for General McClellan to render any assistance. Serious alarm was expressed by many persons and many warnings given me which I could not neglect. I ordered a report of the force left to defend Washington. It was reported by the commander to be less than twenty thousand raw recruits, with not a single organized brigade. A dash like that made a short time before at Winchester would at any time take the Capital of the nation. The report of the force left to defend Washington and the order of the President were referred to Major-General Hitchcock and Adjutant-General Thomas to report—

“First. Whether the President’s orders had been complied with; Second. Whether the force left to defend the city of Washington was sufficient.

“They reported in the negative on both points. These reports were submitted to the President, who also consulted General Totten, General Taylor, General Meigs, and General Ripley. They agreed in the opinion that the Capital was not safe. The President then by written order directed me to retain one of the army corps for the defense of Washington, either Sumner’s or McDowell’s; as part of Sumner’s corps had already embarked I directed McDowell to remain with his command. And the reason was approved by the President.

“Down to this period there had never been a shadow of difference between General McClellan and myself. It is true that I thought his plan of operations objectionable, as the most expensive, the most hazardous, and most protracted that could have been chosen; but I was not a military man, and while he was in command I would not interfere with his plan, and gave him every aid to execute it. But when the case had assumed the form it had done by his disregard of the President’s orders, and by leaving the Capital exposed to seizure by the enemy, I was bound to act, even if I had not been required by the specific written order of the President. Will any man question that such was my duty?

“When this order was communicated to General McClellan it of course provoked his wrath, and the wrath of his friends was directed upon me because I was the agent of its execution. If the force had gone forward as he had designed I believe that Washington would this day be in the hands of the rebels.

“Down to this point, moreover, there had never been the slightest difference between the President and myself. But the entreaties of General McClellan induced the President to modify his order to the

92 *Letter of Secretary of War, Hon. E. M. Stanton.*

extent that Franklin's division (being part of McDowell's corps that had been retained) was detached and sent forward by boat to McClellan.

"This was against my judgment, because I thought the whole force of McDowell should be kept together and sent forward by land on the shortest route to Richmond, thus aiding McClellan, and at the same time covering and protecting Washington by keeping between it and the enemy. In this operation Major-General Hitchcock, General Meigs, and Adjutant-General Thomas agreed; but the President was so anxious that General McClellan should have no cause of complaint that he ordered the force to be sent by water, although that route was then threatened by the *Merrimac*. I yielded my opinion to the President's order; but between him and me there has never been the slightest shadow since I entered the Cabinet, and except the retention of the force under McDowell by the President's orders, for the reasons mentioned, General McClellan has never made a request or expressed a wish that has not been promptly complied with, if in the power of the Government. To me personally he has repeatedly expressed his confidence and his thanks in the dispatches sent me.

"Now, one word as to political motives. What motives can I have to thwart General McClellan? I am not now, never have been, and never will be a candidate for any office. I hold my present post at the request of the President, who knew me personally, but to whom I had not spoken from the 4th of March, 1861, until the day he handed me my commission. I knew that everything I cherish and hold dear would be sacrificed by accepting office. But I thought I might help to save the country, and for that I was willing to perish. If I wanted to be a politician or a candidate for any office would I stand between the Treasury and the robbers who are howling around me? Would I provoke and stand against the whole newspaper gang in the country, of every party, who to sell news would imperil a battle?

"I was never taken for a fool, but there could be no greater madness than for a man to encounter what I do for anything else than motives that overleap time and look forward to eternity. I believe that God Almighty founded this Government, and for my act in the effort to maintain it I expect to stand before Him in judgment.

"You will pardon this long explanation, which has been made to no one else. It is due to you, who were my friends when I was a poor boy at school, and had no claim upon your confidence or kindness. It can not be made public for obvious reasons. General McClellan is at the head of our chief army, he must have every confidence and support, and I am willing that the whole world should revile me rather than to diminish one grain of the strength needed to conquer the rebels. In a struggle like this justice or credit to individuals is but dust in the balance.

"Desiring no office or honor, and anxious only for the peace and

quiet of my home, I suffer no inconvenience beyond that which arises from the trouble and anxiety suffered by worthy friends like yourself, who are naturally disturbed by the clamors and calumnies of those whose interest or feelings are hostile to me.

"The official records will at the proper time fully prove—First. That I have employed the whole power of the Government unsparingly to support General McClellan's operations. Second. That I have not interfered with or thwarted them in any particular. Third. That the force retained from his expedition was not needed and could not have been employed by him; that it was retained by express orders of the President upon military investigation and upon the best military advice in the country. That its retention was required to save the Capital from the danger to which it was exposed by a disregard of the President's positive order of the 6th of March. Fourth. That between the President and myself there has never been the slightest shadow of a difference upon any point, save the detachment of Franklin's force, and that was a point of no significance, but in which I was sustained by Generals Hitchcock, Meigs, Thomas, and Ripley, while the President yielded only to an anxious desire to avoid complaint, declaring at the same time his belief that the force was not needed by General McClellan.

"You will, of course, regard this explanation as being in the strictest confidence, designed only for your information upon matters where you have expressed concern for me.

"The confidence of yourself, and men like you, is a full equivalent for all the railing that has been or can be expended against me; and in the magnitude of the cause all merely individual questions are swallowed up.

"I shall always rejoice to hear from you, and am as ever,

Truly yours,

EDWIN M. STANTON."

Secretary Stanton's circumstantial and pathetic letter to his friend Dr. Dyer should forever set at rest all criticism of his treatment of General McClellan in connection with the latter's unfortunate Peninsular campaign. Such withholding of support from General McClellan as occurred in that movement against the enemy was ordered by President Lincoln and not by Secretary Stanton, and for what he did in this matter Mr. Lincoln assigned very good reasons.