

Episode 109: Burnside Replaces McClellan

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By November 5, 1862, Abraham Lincoln's patience with George McClellan had worn out. On this day, he removed McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac and replaced him with Major General Ambrose Burnside. McClellan had proven to be highly skilled at preparing men for battle and almost inept at leading them in it. His cautious approach during the Peninsula Campaign had allowed Robert E. Lee to take an undermanned Confederate army that had been backed up to the outskirts of Richmond and push McClellan completely out of Virginia. In the Antietam battle, McClellan literally had Lee's plans in his pocket and still failed to secure a victory. Now, six weeks after Antietam, McClellan was still dragging his feet in pursuit of the retreating Confederates and it was just too much for Lincoln.

Ambrose Burnside was a reluctant leader. A likeable man, he seemed to have serious doubts about his own abilities. Major General Darius Couch said "Those of us who were well acquainted with Burnside knew that he was a brave, loyal man, but we did not think he had the military ability to command the Army of the Potomac." Brigadier General George Meade added "He had some very positive qualifications, such as determination and nerve, but he wanted knowledge and judgment, and was deficient in that enlarged mental capacity which is essential in a commander." Burnside himself stated that "he had concluded to take command of the army, but did not regard the subject as one for congratulation." He added "Had I been asked to take it I should have declined; but, being ordered, I cheerfully obey."

Burnside was born in Indiana and had graduated from West Point in 1847. In the 1850's he had left the Army to pursue a business career and ended up in financial ruins. Strangely

enough, he turned for help to an old West Point classmate, George McClellan. At that time, McClellan was an executive with the Illinois Central Railroad and he was able to secure Burnside a job as treasurer of the company. Now, four years later, Burnside was taking his former employer's position at the head of the Army of the Potomac.

To this point in the war, Burnside's performance had been relatively good. His amphibious expedition in North Carolina had closed off much of that state's coast from shipping for the remainder of the war and he commanded the Union's first victories in the East at New Bern and Roanoke Island. At the end of the failed Peninsula Campaign, he had been offered command of the Army of the Potomac but had refused it.

Burnside's command at Antietam was not so stellar. Ironically, here it was McClellan who grew frustrated with Burnside's lack of action. Despite a number of easily fordable crossings over the creek, Burnside was fixated on getting his troops over the bridge that now bears his name. This resulted in a great loss in human life and allowed the time for the Confederates to reinforce their lines and save the battle. It is interesting to contemplate why Lincoln now saw Burnside as the man to replace McClellan given Burnside's own lack of effective action at Antietam. Perhaps he hoped that Burnside had just been affected by the general lack of initiative under McClellan and would shine again once back in an overall command. Unfortunately for the Union, the events of the coming months would show that Lincoln's choice of Burnside was not an improvement over McClellan. It would take another year before Lincoln would find the man he needed to command the armies in the East.