

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Winfield Scott Hancock

By **Christian Andros**

Leadership is an essential element of command. That statement may seem quite obvious to some and is directly related to the intricacies and machinations of moving large military units on the battlefield. Orders need to be given in the right method, in the right sequence and at the right time to get things done. That is the technical part of leadership, the knowing of one's craft. This can be learned through rigorous training and instruction. However, there is another aspect that is much harder to come by. To perform effectively on the battlefield, under harsh and often deadly conditions, men must have more than just physical direction like chess pieces, they must be emotionally inspired, often to perform beyond limits they themselves did not know were possible.

Lieutenant General John Archer Lejeune, the thirteenth commandant of the Marine Corps once said that "Leadership is the sum of those qualities of intellect, human understanding, and moral character that enables a person to inspire and control a group of people successfully." That kind of leadership is quite rare and the men who possess it imbue their troops with a sense of confidence to believe that no order or mission is too difficult to achieve. Major General Winfield Scott Hancock was such a leader and showed that quality at numerous times during the US Civil War.

Hancock was born to be a soldier. His physical appearance was ideal for a senior commander. Tall at 6'2" with a thick head of brown hair, well groomed mustache and beard, he was described as "finely proportioned with a most graceful carriage, and self-poise, and handsome."¹ It was once observed by a staff officer of his that "had General Hancock worn citizen's (civilian) clothes and given commands in the army to those who did not know him, he would be likely obeyed at once, for he had the appearance of man born to command."²

¹ H.A. Lewis, *Hidden Treasures or Why Some Succeed While Others Fail* (Cleveland OH: American Publishing Company, 1892), 292.

² F.A. Haskell, *The Battle Of Gettysburg* (Boston: Mudge Press, 1908), 69.

Hancock was born in 1824 in Montgomery County in Southeastern Pennsylvania. His father, Benjamin, who was a schoolteacher at the time of his birth and later became a lawyer, and his mother, Elizabeth, named him after Winfield Scott, the Army general who had achieved great fame in the War of 1812. His father was also quite active in Democratic Party political circles and that would also impact Hancock much later in life.

Young Winfield was educated in Norristown, PA, first in the private Norristown Academy and then he moved to public school when one opened. The local congressman nominated him to a commission at West Point in 1840, where he entered at the age of 16. As he left home, his father packed two books in his suitcase, the United States Constitution and Blackstone's *Commentaries*. Benjamin said that since he was going to be a soldier, he should understand the principles of civil law and respect them because when republics have fallen, generally it has been by soldiers' swords. This gave him a lifelong appreciation of law and government.³ After a mediocre performance (he graduated 18th out of 25 students) he was commissioned as an infantry officer in 1844. His education would have exposed him to contemporary subjects such as engineering, mathematics and the physical sciences, like geography and chemistry.

As a young army lieutenant, his first posting was to Fort Towson in the Indian Territories. He was assigned to recruiting duties in Kentucky at the outbreak of the war with Mexico in 1846. He petitioned for a combat assignment several times but was rejected. However, Major General Winfield Scott, who had visited West Point a few years earlier and took an interest in young Hancock, was in need of good young staff officers for the Mexican War. Scott reassigned Hancock to serve under him.⁴

Seeing action at the Battle of Churubusco, Mexico on August 20th 1847, Hancock led a small unit of men on a bayonet charge that helped break the local defenses and secured Scott's eventual drive onward to Mexico City. He was wounded and was recognized for bravery. He learned that men will respond quickly to confident leadership and advance even in the face of danger.⁵

After the war, Hancock was assigned to various garrison duties in Florida, Kansas and Utah. He participated in putting down two insurrections during this time, the so-called Seminole and Mormon Wars. Later, while at St. Louis, Hancock met Almira Russell, the daughter of a prominent Missouri merchant. His West Point classmate Don Carlos Buell introduced the pair, and after a short courtship, they were married in 1850 and had two children. Mrs. Hancock was an accomplished woman in her own right and would later publish her husband's memoir after the war.

Hancock proved excellent in military administration and correspondence. He took to the bureaucratic aspects with energy seen in few others and was promoted to Captain

³ Glenn Tucker. *Hancock the Superb* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

and made a quartermaster in 1855. A superior, Major E. W. Clark remarked, "If I recall one trait of Hancock's character more than another, I would name his conscientious devotion to details and his thoroughness in the minutiae of affairs. His eye (seemed) to be equipped with a wonderful sweep for the particulars of the business."⁶

By 1859 Hancock was posted as a quartermaster in Los Angeles until the outbreak of the Civil War. Officers from both North and South were congenial and even friendly, but both knew what was coming. June 15, 1861, just a few weeks after Fort Sumner, was the day of their departure eastward. The commanding officer there, Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, had just resigned from the US Army to serve the Confederacy. It was time for both groups to choose sides. Old army comrades, Hancock, Captains Lewis Addison Armistead, and Richard Brooke Garnett gathered for the last time at a farewell party organized by Almira Hancock.⁷ After a stirring song sung by Mrs. Johnson at the piano, a tearful Armistead broke down and wept telling Hancock, "goodbye- you can never know what this (war) has cost me".⁸

Hancock came east with his wife and family fully expecting to continue his quartermaster duties for the rapidly growing Union Army, but he was quickly promoted to brigadier general on September 23, 1861, and given an infantry brigade in the Army of the Potomac. He saw his first real action during the Peninsula Campaign the following year.

The Battle of Williamsburg was fought on May 5, 1862 in a steady rain. After Federal troops blunted a ferocious counterattack that could have turned the Union left flank, General Hancock was sent out to occupy an abandoned Confederate defensive position, but was told in strict terms not to move his brigade any further without orders. They advanced through adjacent woods and found the works abandoned, just as a group of runaway slaves said they would be. For the moment, the Confederates appeared unaware of Hancock's arrival on their flank. He saw his chance to make a surprise attack, but he couldn't get his superior, Major General Edwin Vose Sumner, to approve it, and actually received orders to withdraw. Captain George Armstrong Custer, describing Hancock's anger at General Sumner, remarked, "Never at a loss for expletives... Hancock was not at all loath to express his condemnation [of foolish orders]".⁹

Risking potential punishment for insubordination, he delayed carrying out that order as long as possible, but as the day was ending, he reluctantly began to abandon the position. This was typical of the war's early Union generalship: many of the old guard, like Sumner himself who was 65 years old at the time, were unaccustomed to the pressures and split-second opportunities of modern combat, while other officers who

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ David M. Jordan, *Winfield Scott Hancock: A Soldier's Life*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 64-6.

⁸ Perry D. Jamison, *Winfield Scott Hancock: Gettysburg Hero* (Abilene TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2003), 18.

⁹ Jordan, *A Soldier's Life*, 44.

could quickly evaluate a situation based on actual combat experience did not yet have higher rank to make effective tactical decisions.¹⁰ This marked the formative portion of Hancock's Civil War experience, a realization that capable men needed to be quickly moved up the ranks if the Federal army was to be able to take advantage of openings and avoid disasters.

Just as he began to withdraw, Hancock saw Confederates moving in his direction. Major General James Longstreet had noticed the potential threat and dispatched part of Major General Daniel Harvey Hill's brigade to protect the Confederate left. This turn of events provided an ideal opportunity, so Hancock used this chance to repulse a Confederate assault and then attack the rebel flank. He shouted to his men, "You must hold this ground, or I'm ruined!" The rebels rashly charged, and as Union officer Hiram Burnham reported, "We poured a volley into them which thinned their ranks terribly. Blinded and dismayed they still pressed on, firing wildly at random." From their protected position, Hancock's men kept up a merciless barrage that sent "death and destruction in their midst. They wavered, they faltered" and "they halted." Recognizing the critical moment in the fight, Hancock ordered a charge. The Southerners fled and the field was won. This action was noticed by the overall Union Commander, Major General George Brinton McClellan who remarked in his correspondence, "Hancock was superb". This description always afterwards applied to him.¹¹

McClellan's opinion of Hancock was further evident during the Battle of Antietam when he was promoted by the commanding general to division command following the death of Major General Israel Bush Richardson on September 17, 1862. However, this relationship proved to be short lived as President Lincoln relieved McClellan after the battle and replaced him with Major General Ambrose Burnside in the Army of the Potomac. Burnside took the army southward to central Virginia in pursuit of the rebels and eventually caught up with them at the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg as the winter of 1862 approached. He also reorganized the army into three "grand divisions" and Hancock now served in II Corps under Major General Darius Nash Couch¹²

Burnside's plan of attack was to cross the river by pontoon bridge and attack the Confederates. Due to a delay in delivering the pontoon boats for the bridges, the Federals suffered a significant delay, allowing General Robert E. Lee, who had dispersed his forces expecting an attack on Richmond, to reunite his scattered army and fully entrench on Marye's Heights to the west of Fredericksburg. The Confederates now occupied formidable positions with both infantry and artillery sheltered from fire by a sunken road and stone wall. Despite protests from subordinates, including Hancock, Burnside persisted on his original path. This proved to be a fatal mistake.

¹⁰ Glenn David Brasher, "General Hancock's Hour," *New York Times*, May 8, 2012.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jamison, *Gettysburg Hero*, 35-9.

Hancock's division was among the troops that were ordered to storm Marye's Heights on December 11. Hancock's division alone would suffer over 2,000 casualties, absorbing in the process one of the highest divisional losses — in terms of percentage of those engaged — of the entire war. This disastrous course was followed to the point of absurdity fourteen times by brigade sized units. All of them failed and the Union suffered nearly 8,000 casualties on that day. Couch would later describe the action a, “fighting I had never seen before, nothing approaching it in terrible uproar and destruction.” He famously portrayed the action of each new brigade approaching the wall only to dissolve “like snow coming down on warm ground. It is only murder now,” Couch informed his superiors.¹³

Hancock's and many other officers were demoralized. He wrote a letter to Almira in which he said, “These were veteran regiments, led by able and tried commanders, and I regret to say that their places cannot soon be filled” .The lack of confidence in Burnside's ability pervaded all ranks of the army. Major General William Buell Franklin confided that after Fredericksburg he had “lost all confidence” in Burnside's ability. “There was not a man in my command who did not believe that everything he would undertake would fail,” he asserted. Lincoln accepted Burnside's resignation and Major General Joseph Hooker would be the new commander of the Army of the Potomac, it's third in just five months.¹⁴

Hooker in many ways was the antithesis of the indecisive Burnside. He was all bluster and boast. The men responded to him well and he rebuilt the army and renewed its spirit by the spring of 1863. To his fighting force, now outnumbering Lee's by more than two to one, Hooker added a bold plan. He would march the bulk of his army in a wide turning movement to get to Lee's rear, while leaving a blocking force to demonstrate in front of Fredericksburg. The plan was to trap the Confederates between these two forces and cause them to mount a desperate attack or retreat south towards their capital.¹⁵

Hooker enjoyed early success and virtually had the Army of Northern Virginia pinned between the hammer and anvil. However, on May 1, 1863, at the outbreak of the battle named for the Chancellorsville estate on which it was fought, ”Fighting Joe” Hooker seemed to lose his nerve and his army stalled. That development, in addition to Lee's brilliant maneuver to further divide his force and send Major General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson to outflank the Federals, allowed the Yankees to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Hooker himself, after suffering this devastating counter,

¹³ Donald C. Pfanz, “Union troops sent on a suicide mission”, *Free Lance- Star* (Fredericksburg, VA), June 9, 2001.

¹⁴ Jordan, *A Soldier's Life*, 64.

¹⁵ Gallagher, Gary W. ed., *Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), ix-x.

was stunned senseless when a cannon ball struck a post he was leaning against. He was replaced by Couch, now at the point of disgust with Hooker's conduct. Hancock was ordered to cover the now precarious Union retreat on May 4-6. Couch attributed the safety of the entire Federal force to Hancock's generalship, saying that "only Hancock's division now held Lee's army." With firm commands, directing lowly corporals up to full brigadiers, Hancock bought time to bring the Army back across the Rappahannock, fending off a complete disaster.¹⁶

The events of the past few months had wrought a series of defeats to the Union Army. Winfield Scott Hancock had been in the thick of it from Antietam, through Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. His division in the II Corps underwent stresses and strains seen by few others. But like the old Chinese proverb, "the toughest fire makes the strongest steel" he and his men came through this with even more grit and determination. When Couch followed through on his contempt and resigned from the army, the command of the entire II Corps fell to Hancock. It was primed for the most pivotal battle it would see during the entire war.

During June of 1863, the Pennsylvania Campaign was in full swing. Hancock had ably led the II Corps north through a series of minor encounters in Virginia and into Maryland. By the 28th, Lincoln had made perhaps an epic decision to replace Hooker with Major General George Gordon Meade, then commanding V Corps. A fellow Pennsylvanian, Meade had a good relationship with Hancock and saw him as a trusted and professional officer. This was borne out on July 1 when word reached Meade that the conflict at Gettysburg was already under way.

Meade sent for Hancock from his command post in Uniontown, PA. to join him immediately. Word had reached Meade that two Federal Corps (I and IX) were engaged near Gettysburg. Also, the I Corps commander and close friend of both men, Major General John Fulton Reynolds, had been killed. Meade had thought about a defensive line further south at Pipe Creek but wanted a first-hand appraisal of the situation at Gettysburg and the surrounding terrain to determine the direction of the campaign. Hancock was ordered to ride ahead of the rest of the army, take overall command of the forces there, and make an assessment as to whether to stand and fight or fall back to Pipe Creek. In some ways, this would be the most significant operational decision ever faced by any Union general.¹⁷

Hancock, ever the scholar for detail, rode to the battlefield not on horseback, but in an army ambulance, allowing him to review topographic maps of the site. Upon arrival, he met Major General Oliver Otis Howard who was technically senior to Hancock and reiterated that fact emphatically. Hancock countered with Meade's written orders that superseded the rank issue. Historians differ on how this exchange may have occurred, but the results were clear. Hancock and Howard worked together to shore up

¹⁶ Jamison, *Gettysburg Hero*, 52-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-8.

the scattered situation at Gettysburg and made overall preparations to stand and fight the Confederate army. Howard's own division commander, Major General Carl Christian Schurz considered Hancock's arrival, "most fortunate."¹⁸

After the Federal forces had been driven out of the town and to the higher ground about half a mile south of Gettysburg around 4:30 p.m., Hancock intuitively understood that the area of Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill made an excellent defensive position, and were to be held at all costs. He ordered I Corps to extend the Union line across the entire breadth of the hill. Howard had only chosen to secure a portion of it. Major General Abner Doubleday protested initially, arguing that his troops had been engaged since 10:00 a.m. Hancock replied, "I know sir, but this is an emergency and everyone must do all he can." Doubleday sent the Iron Brigade to completely secure the hill. After the battle he recalled, "He (Hancock) was our good genius, for he made such admirable dispositions that he secured the ridge and held it."¹⁹

Later in the afternoon, Hancock had also grasped the linkage between the heights above the town and the two rocky outcrops (Little Round Top and Big Round Top) to the Union left. As Major General Henry Warner Slocum's XII Corps arrived, Hancock ordered Brigadier General John White Geary to move troops and secure the Round Tops. Now the Union "fishhook" defense, as it would later become known, took shape. Union troops, previously dispirited, now began to speak of a possible "Fredericksburg in reverse" within the ranks. By 4:00 p.m., General Hancock dispatched a message to Meade that an effective defense was underway at Gettysburg.²⁰

In addition to his preparatory activities, Hancock also turned his attention to improving morale and confidence in the units he encountered. Keep in mind that these troops had suffered serious defeats at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville just months earlier and the fighting spirit was quite low. He rode up Cemetery Hill and came upon the first unit he saw, a brigade from Howard's XI Corps that had been badly beaten earlier and driven from the town. He told the colonel in charge there, one Orland Smith, that his own corps was on the way, but might not be in time before the next attack and asked him if his brigade could hold. Smith's reply was lukewarm at best, "I think I can." Hancock was clearly not pleased with this and repeated the question in a more directive tone, "Now Colonel, can you hold it?"

Onlookers witnessed a marked change in Smith, now rallying to meet Hancock's challenge. "I will!" he said. Smith, now filled with newly found confidence, began to direct other units on the hill. He told another officer to turn around, face the enemy and form a battle line. When the man hesitated, Smith had him arrested on the spot and

¹⁸ Tucker, *Hancock*, 133.

¹⁹ Shelby Foote, *Stars in Their Courses: The Gettysburg Campaign June-July 1863*, Modern Library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

replaced. This was a clear example of the inspirational leadership that Hancock was able to impart to his troops.²¹

As the battle proceeded into the third and final day, it was General Hancock's own II Corps who would bear the brunt of Pickett's Charge, an attack preceded by an intense artillery bombardment. As men cowered for safety, they caught sight of their commander riding along the exposed line mounted on horseback. He was trying to show each and every man that "their general was behind them in the storm." When a concerned subordinate protested that he should not expose himself to such risks, he replied: "There are times when a Corps Commander's life does not count." The rallying impact on the troops was immediate.²²

However, a Confederate minié ball passed through his saddle wounding him in the thigh. Bits of wood and metal were embedded in the wound. Quick action by his staff helped fashion a makeshift tourniquet from a pistol barrel and handkerchief. This likely saved his life. To the end, he refused all action to remove him to the rear. "No thank you," he told his aides. "Attend to your commands gentlemen. I will take care of myself." He remained on the field until the charge was repulsed and victory was secured. In a matter of extreme irony, his old and dear friend, Brigadier General Lewis Armistead, was killed leading a division against the very same part of the battlefield.²³ So ended the climactic battle that would serve as Hancock's crowning military achievement.

Hancock took an extended leave of six months from the army after Gettysburg, to convalesce from his wound at his boyhood home in Norristown, PA. It took several attempts before doctors could remove the bullet. Even after his return to full duty, his leg wound was prone to breaking back open and bleed, even extruding fragments of bone. He would cite this in later correspondence, "'Since the 18th I have not been on duty- having found it necessary to rest for a few days on account of my Gettysburg wound. A piece of bone having come out since I shall I think have no more trouble. I expect to take command again in a day or so'"²⁴

After Gettysburg, there were several instances where his wound limited his mobility on horseback and it can be reasonably argued that it never completely healed and robbed the general of his vitality.

He returned to combat in March 1864, and while he returned to his familiar II Corps, it was now in a vastly different Federal Army. Ulysses S. Grant had been made overall Union Commander by President Lincoln. Meade, however, remained in operational command of the Army of the Potomac. Grant gave Meade a singular mission, "Lee's Army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go

²¹ Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 101.

²² Tucker, *Hancock*, 150-1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1155-6.

²⁴ Winfield Scott Hancock Papers, 1864, Pearce Civil War Collection, Navarro College, Corsicana, Texas

also”. Basically this was a plan to engage the Confederates in a campaign of sustained offensive pressure to eventually wear down and destroy them as a fighting force. Meanwhile, the Confederate Army, already weakened from its Gettysburg losses, had generally adopted a more defensive strategy aimed at keeping the Federals away from Richmond and simply surviving long enough to exhaust the North’s political will to continue.²⁵

This period became known as the Overland Campaign. After the campaign’s first major battle in the Wilderness, Union forces kept up the advance despite having been defeated. By May 8, II Corps was again engaged at the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. Lee had the opportunity to entrench his forces behind solid earthworks and enjoyed what limited higher ground was available. A particular section of the Confederate line bulged out of Lee’s line and was well supported by artillery. It became known as the “Mule Shoe” and was manned by Lieutenant General Richard Ewell’s Second Corps.²⁶

Building on an attack plan from an earlier Union advance on the Mule Shoe, Grant wanted the entire II Corps to lead an attack on May 12 supported by elements of the VI and IX Corps. It was thought that a portion of the line was a potential weak point. Grant’s plan was very complicated. It called for several moving parts to be executed in concert. It also failed to identify an overall commander despite having three corps involved. Lastly, the Union forces had little knowledge of what troops occupied this area of the Confederate line and local maps were highly inaccurate. For his part, Hancock neither took the initiative to conduct proper reconnaissance nor did he petition his superiors for more a clear command designation.²⁷

On the positive side, Lee had decided to weaken the Mule Shoe the night before by withdrawing his artillery. He did not expect any attack at that point and wanted to be able to move quickly if Grant decided to withdraw. Also, a deep fog developed overnight and II Corps was able to advance close to the lines undetected. This allowed Hancock’s troops to swarm up over the earthworks and break the tip of the Mule Shoe with some ease. Almost an entire division of Ewell’s men were captured along with two generals.²⁸

This success proved to be short-lived. Lee threw troops under Major General John Brown Gordon into the line. They conducted a vicious counter attack in a driving spring rainstorm. Union reinforcements poured pell-mell into the gap, but had no clear direction and immediately bogged down. This area saw men do battle, not at normal distances, but at point blank range, using rifles as clubs, shooting thru gaps in logs and throwing

²⁵ Dr. Curtis S. King, Dr. William Glenn Robertson, and Steven E. Clay. *Staff Ride Handbook for the Overland Campaign, Virginia, 4 May to 15 June 1864: A Study in Operational-Level Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, n.d.), 41-5.

²⁶ Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Spotsylvania Campaign* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998),43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Curtis, *Staff Ride*, 65-6.

bayonets like javelins. This fighting resulted in carnage on an extreme scale and was named “The Bloody Angle” for obvious reasons. Hancock had made an impressive early breakthrough, but lacked any concept for how to exploit his initial success. The impressive loss of life did not result in any significant gains in territory or position and after a few days, both armies withdrew further south only to fight again another day.²⁹

As the spring of 1864 turned to summer, Hancock’s II Corps had continued the move southward along with the rest of Grant’s army. Along the way, his corps engaged in almost every major battle where it was to serve as Grant’s most trusted and thus most used, fighting force. Massive numbers of replacements were infused, and the corps lost many of its most experienced troops and officers. The army bypassed Richmond and began the final major campaign of the war, the Siege of Petersburg. The town, just twenty miles south of Richmond, was a major logistics hub connecting major rail lines of the Deep South to the Confederate capital. Grant’s intention was to isolate both the capital and Lee’s army from its support base. Union Forces laid siege for nearly nine months and both sides found themselves bogged down in static trench warfare draining both sides of veteran soldiers.

By late August, Hancock’s men were once again ordered to undertake a difficult mission, to complete the destruction of the Weldon railroad. This connected Petersburg to Weldon, NC where it could tap into the Confederacy’s lone remaining port in Wilmington, NC. Previous Union attempts had cut portions of the line, but Grant wanted about 40 miles of rail line broken. II Corps moved south to occupy existing breastworks at Reams’s Station.

Upon arriving at Ream’s Station on August 24, Hancock made no improvements to the fortifications built by Confederate troops two months earlier. The corps had been previously engaged north of the James River just days before. Troops were exhausted in the Virginia heat and Hancock himself had yet another flare-up of his old Gettysburg wound. Grant had taken ill and left Meade in overall command. Taking a very passive defensive posture, Meade was able to reinforce most Federal positions, but even though it was known that rebel troops were advancing on Reams’s Station, Hancock’s men did not see any support and were trusted to hold the line yet again.³⁰

Lee had viewed Reams’s Station in very stark terms. He saw it as Grant did, as a major supply route, but unknown to the Northern commander, it was also astride the intended Confederate egress route from Petersburg near Dinwiddie Court House. This was a major threat and needed a major response. Lee sent Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill Jr., one of his most senior commanders along with eight brigades of infantry and supporting artillery, some 10,000 men. Hill took ill soon after, and Major General Henry Heth took tactical command with orders that he “must carry this position.” Lee had also employed a fairly new tactic, that of sharpshooter battalions. These units

²⁹ Curtis, *Staff Ride*, 67.

³⁰ John Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign: June 1864-April 1865* (New York: De Capo Press, 1999), 142-4.

recruited the most experienced and best marksmen who used long range Enfield rifles from England. They took advantage of local knowledge of the forests and trails to harass Union troops.³¹

The afternoon of August 25 saw the main Confederate attack. The II Corps had exhausted its artillery ammunition due to sharpshooter attacks on its supply trains. Rebel artillery fire forced some of the Union defenders to abandon the earthworks which created a very vulnerable situation. Despite several valiant attempts to rally his men and a brave but ultimately disastrous counter-attack, Hancock had to endure the sight of Heth's infantry sweeping over his men and routing them. By the conclusion of the fighting, II Corps, which had to that point never lost a battle flag, suffered casualties of 2,700 men and numerous standards. Confederate losses were less than 1,000. Reams's Station marked the end of Hancock's effectiveness as a corps commander. He left the army on November 26, 1864, just ninety days later.³²

His parting words to his men were, "Conscious that whatever military honor has fallen to me during my association with the II Corps has been won by the gallantry of the officers and soldiers I have commanded ... in parting from them I am severing the strongest ties of my military life".³³

Winfield Scott Hancock remained active in Democratic Party circles throughout his life and was constantly invited to enter politics. Even though he did not actively seek office, he was nominated by the party for president in the election of 1880. His opponent was James Garfield, a politician from Ohio. Initially he appeared to be a strong candidate.. First, he was obviously famous from his illustrious war record and had notable support from other heroes, such as McClellan, his old commander, Major General William Starke Rosecrans and Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles who all campaigned on his behalf.³⁴

Additionally, he had widespread support in the reintegrated Southern states. This was partly due to his party affiliation (the pre-war South was staunchly Democratic) but also due to his fair and compassionate administration of Southern states after the war ended. He served as military governor to Louisiana and Texas and in 1867, issued General Order #40 which restored civilian rule to those states, restarting suspended civil liberties, such as right to jury trial, and freedom of speech and the press. His former foe, Major General John Brown Gordon, remarked: "this subjugation of himself and all his military powers to the supremacy of the civil law is a spectacle of moral grandeur almost without parallel in history. In their (his Southern countrymen) estimation, no language can exaggerate the honors due General Hancock for this great action, nor overstate its beneficent consequences to their rights and liberties"³⁵

³¹ Ibid., 148-9.

³² Ibid., 150-1.

³³ Jordan, *Hancock*, 173.

³⁴ Tucker, *Hancock*, 300-3.

³⁵ Ibid., 279-81.

Conversely, two forces worked against him. First were the uneven and undignified years of the U. S. Grant administration. This had persuaded many voters that a military officer would be ineffective in matters of civil affairs. The numerous scandals actually worked against Hancock despite the differences in party affiliation.

Secondly, and perhaps more damaging was the deep-seated Northern distrust of any Southern political resurgence. Grant himself, while campaigning against Hancock in New York, would claim: “The Democratic party, organized as it now is, is under the control of the rebel brigadiers. . . We are not willing, and you are not willing, and among the people of the Empire State there are men who will not submit to Southern rule. We want to be ruled by Northern people while we are alive.”³⁶

The results of the 1880 election were one of the closest outcomes in US history. Out of nine million total votes cast, Garfield won with a plurality of about 7,000. Had Hancock not lost New York State by just 12,000 votes he would have been elected President. Almira woke him around 5:00 a.m. to break the news. “It has been a complete Waterloo for you”, she said. “That is all right, he answered her, I can stand it.” In modern times, such a humble and poised reaction would be unthinkable.³⁷

Winfield Scott Hancock died on February 7, 1886 in Washington D.C. Complications from his old war wound as well as diabetes caused his death. Almira Hancock requested a simple funeral and laid the war hero to rest in his native Norristown, PA. Generals and privates alike attended. Ranks of veterans stood in salute as his casket passed. A week after the funeral, on what would have been General Hancock’s 62nd birthday, the Reverend John R. Paxton spoke the following: “They buried my old commander—the ideal soldier—the pure patriot—the noblest man—the stainless name—gentle as a woman, with a voice low and caressing as love in the camp...but as loud as thunder in the battle to inspire and command.”³⁸

If leadership is comprised of intellect, human understanding and moral character, it is clear the Major General Winfield Scott Hancock possessed all three qualities. His willingness to weigh all options, take the appropriate risks and then act in a decisive manner, proved his intellect. His ability to lead men in battle and inspire their resolve demonstrated his human understanding. His courage in the face of personal danger and his devotion to his nation and its Constitution showed his moral character. He was a leader in every sense of the word and a true hero to his country.

³⁶ Ibid., 302.

³⁷ Ibid., 303-4.

³⁸ Ibid., 311.

Winfield Scott Hancock

Born	February 14, 1824 Montgomery Square, PA
Died	February 9, 1876 Governors Island, NY
Buried	Montgomery Cemetery, West Norriton Township, Montgomery County, PA.
Father	Benjamin Franklin Hancock
Mother	Elizabeth Hoxworth
Career Milestones	Graduated West Point 1844 Brevet First Lieutenant and wounded Mexican American War 1847 Brigadier General September 1861 Major General of Volunteers November 1862 Wounded at Fredericksburg Wounded at Chancellorsville Commanded II Corps at Gettysburg, performed superbly and wounded Commanded II Corps in the Overland Campaign and defeated at Petersburg Supervised execution of Lincoln conspirators 1866 Major General of Volunteers and served on the Plains 1872 Command of the Division of the Atlantic Democratic Party candidate for president in the election of 1880, defeated by James Garfield
