

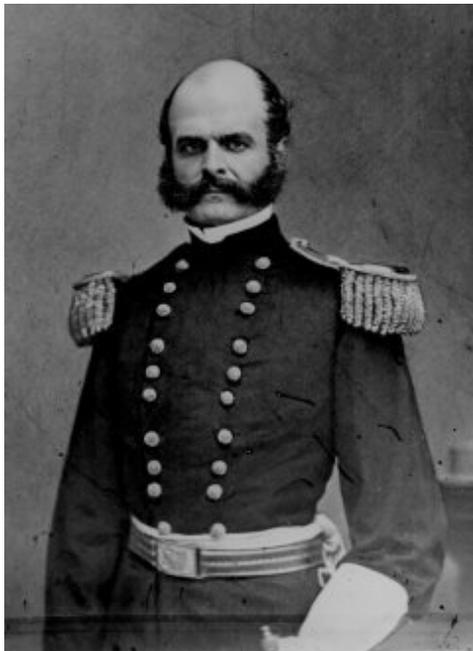
# *Moments in Leadership*

## **June 2015: Handling Bad News**

*By Paul Marcone, President, Ox Hill Leadership Tours*

One of the hallmarks of good leadership is the ability to handle bad news. Often, this requires a leader to put aside their ego and make tough decisions in the midst of uncertainty and personal disappointment.

The plight of Union General Ambrose Burnside at the Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862) is a good illustration of how **not** to handle bad news.



During the Antietam Campaign, Burnside commanded the IX Corps of the Union Army of the Potomac. The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest day in American history - more than 23,000 Americans were killed or wounded along the banks of Antietam Creek outside small village of Sharpsburg, MD.

At Antietam, the Union army found itself again under the command of Burnside's old friend and mentor - General George McClellan. In the two weeks preceding Antietam, McClellan revitalized the army and restored morale after two disastrous campaigns. In mid-September of 1862, thanks to a stroke of good luck, McClellan had caught up to Lee's army in Western Maryland. The Rebels were divided and vulnerable to defeat and destruction.

During the dark days of early summer, Burnside was twice offered command of the Army of the Potomac by President Lincoln. But, partly out of loyalty to his old friend, McClellan, and partly from a sense of his own limitations, Burnside turned down the

offers. As the Union army moved out of the Washington defenses in pursuit of Lee's Confederates in early September, Burnside was pleased and flattered when McClellan gave him command of one wing of the Army of the Potomac— his own IX Corps and the I Corps.

But early on the morning of September 16th — less than 24 hours before the Battle of Antietam would begin — Burnside would have to deal with some very bad news. His commanding officer and old friend, McClellan — without explanation — ordered the I Corps away from Burnside's position on the left flank of the army to the far right flank. This left Burnside confused about the chain of command and his role in the upcoming battle. More significantly, the decision put Burnside in a funk. He didn't know how to interpret the sudden decision by his old friend, McClellan, to strip Burnside of wing command. Burnside must have struggled with the thought that perhaps his mentor had lost confidence in him. Perhaps McClellan was disappointed by Burnside's performance during the pursuit of Lee's army. Or maybe McClellan was angry with Burnside for some other reason.

McClellan never took the time to explain his hasty decision to Burnside. Instead of rising above his personal disappointment at having been stripped of wing command, Burnside sulked.

Burnside knew that a great battle was on hand — a battle that could end the war. He was told by McClellan on September 16th to expect orders the next morning to seize the bridge over Antietam Creek in Burnside's front, and continue attacking the Rebel right flank. Instead of scouting his position and preparing for a morning attack, Burnside did nothing.

When morning dawned on September 17, 1862 there was a delay in getting official orders to Burnside. By 8:00 am it was obvious to Burnside that a furious battle was raging on the other end of the Union line. But no orders had arrived and Burnside made no effort to communicate with McClellan. Precious hours slipped away while Burnside sulked and waited for orders.

When the orders did come later that morning, it took Burnside several hours to launch an attack over the bridge. Further time was lost in trying to find a place to ford the creek. In the end, Burnside was able to take the bridge, ford the creek downstream and outflank the Rebel defenders. But Burnside's sulking and stubborn refusal to take any initiative gave the Rebels enough time to bring up reinforcements in the nick of time to stop Burnside dead in his tracks once his troops finally were able to get across Antietam Creek.

Antietam turned out to be a bloody draw. Had Burnside been able to get over the grave disappointment he felt in being demoted and taken even a modicum of initiative, Antietam might have turned out to be a decisive victory that could have ended the Civil War two years early.

But Burnside could not put his emotions aside and see the big picture. He could not handle the bad news that he was no longer a wing commander. Human nature has not changed in 150 years. One can't blame Burnside for being disappointed. But great leaders are able to rise above personal disappointment and see beyond themselves.

That's what visionary and effective leadership is all about.

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