



## WHY GETTYSBURG?

An Analysis of the Command Decisions and  
Intelligence Failures That Led to Gettysburg

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“To write history,” Frederick the Great once complained to a correspondent, “is to compile the follies of men and the blows of chance.”<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1863 the Confederate and Union armies stood facing each other across the Rappahannock River, like two football teams at a scrimmage line, only this was no game. The goal here was nothing less than the survival of the United States of America or the independence of the newly created Confederate States of America.

General Robert E. Lee, class of 1829 of the United States Military Academy at West Point understood that he could not fight a war of attrition against the industrial might and numerical superiority of the North, even though the South had been successful in holding its own in the Eastern Theater of Operation.<sup>2</sup> He sensed that time was running out for the Confederacy. What was needed, he believed, was an audacious strike into the very heartland of the North. He believed that the Confederacy’s only realistic chance to win their independence was by demoralizing the northern population. If they believed the war could not be won, or could only be won at too great a cost, they might unseat the Lincoln administration, which could lead to Southern independence. Lee thought carrying the war to northern soil furthered this end more than standing on the defensive and deflecting Northern offensives in Virginia.

Lee had attempted a northern invasion nine months earlier, when he invaded Maryland in a campaign that reached its bloody climax at Antietam. Now, in the aftermath of his victory at Chancellorsville in early May, 1863, he desired to embark on a new offensive into Pennsylvania. Besides influencing northern morale, Lee also hoped to accomplish:

... the relief of the Shenandoah Valley from the troops that had occupied the lower part of it during the winter and spring, and if practical the transfer of the scene of hostilities north of the Potomac. It was thought that the corresponding movements on the part of the enemy to which those contemplated by us would probably give rise, might offer a fair opportunity to strike a blow at the army then commanded by General Hooker, and that in any event that army would be compelled to leave Virginia, and, possibly, to draw to its support troops designed to operate against other parts of the country. In this way it was supposed that the enemy’s plan of campaign for the summer would be broken up, and part of the season of active operations be consumed in the formation of new

combinations, and the preparation that they would require. In addition to these advantages, it was hoped that other valuable results might be attained by military success.<sup>3</sup>

Lee clearly understood the importance of seizing and the initiative from General Joseph Hooker, the commander of the Army of the Potomac. President Abraham Lincoln had written Hooker on January 26, 1863, placing him in command of the Army of the Potomac. He wrote, "I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain success can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."<sup>4</sup>

One can sense the President's frustration and anxiety with the leadership of the Army of the Potomac. Hooker had freedom to maneuver the army as he saw fit with one important caveat; he had to provide for the security of the capital. If the enemy were able to maneuver a large force north of the Potomac unchecked, General Henry W. Halleck, general-in-chief of the army, warned, "Neither this Capital nor Harpers Ferry could long hold out against a large force. They must depend for their security very much upon the co-operation of your army."<sup>5</sup>

On June 3, 1863 General Lee's army began its movement north from Fredericksburg, Virginia.<sup>6</sup> Twenty days into the campaign, on June 23, Lee made a decision that profoundly affected the entire campaign. He gave General James E.B. Stuart, his cavalry commander, discretionary orders to detach from the main army and launch a mini-campaign on his own, the consequences of which are still debated today. Stuart was an excellent cavalry officer. Like all great cavalry officers, he was bold, brave, audacious, and always willing to push the envelope just a little further to obtain his objective. One would be hard pressed to name a conservative or timid cavalry officer who was successful. Napoléon Bonaparte, whose spirit and influence loomed largely over the Civil War generals, wrote, "Cavalry needs audacity and practice; above all it must not be dominated by the spirit of conservatism or avarice."<sup>7</sup>

The two key points of the discretionary order by which General Lee empowered General Stuart were, "You will, however, be able to judge whether *you can pass around their army without hindrance*, doing them all the damage you can and cross the river *east* of the mountains. In either case, *after crossing the river*, you must move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops, collecting information, provisions, etc."<sup>8</sup> [emphasis added]

It was left to Stuart's to decide whether he could, "... pass around their army without hindrance ..." and cross, "... the river [Potomac] *east* of the mountains." There is a question whether Stuart, after crossing the Potomac east of the mountains, made a good faith effort to, "... move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops, *collecting information, provisions, etc.*" The phenomenon that Stuart in his attempted circuit around the Union army is what the Prussian military philosopher Karl Von Clausewitz called *friction*. In his monumental study of warfare, *On War*, Clausewitz writes, "Everything in war is very simple but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction ..." He continues,

Imagine a traveler who late in the day decides to cover two more stages before nightfall, only four or five hours more, on a paved highway with relays of horses: it should be an easy trip. But at the next station he finds no fresh horses, or only poor ones; the country grows hilly, the road bad, night falls, and finally after many difficulties he is only too glad to reach a resting place with any kind of primitive accommodations. It is much the same in war. Countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee – combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal.<sup>9</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate the merits of Lee's order to Stuart, or whether Stuart was derelict in his duty. Suffice it to say that General Lee placed in General Stuart's hands discretionary orders dated June 23, 1863, the consequences of which no one could have anticipated. While it is true

that there were some elements of the cavalry that remained with the main force, Stuart's best brigades and Lee's cavalry commander and chief intelligence officer, would not be. The cavalry that remained with Lee's army was relegated to two primary functions: providing the vanguard of the army's advance into Pennsylvania and blocking the lower passes of the Blue Ridge from possible Union interdiction. With Stuart and his three best brigades gone, Lee also lost his cavalry screen that prevented Hooker's cavalry from divining the intentions and movements of the Army of Northern Virginia. In the early stages of the campaign, while the army moved down the Shenandoah Valley, Stuart's cavalry had ably screened the movement and helped keep the Federals guessing. They did their job so well that it prompted General Halleck to write General Hooker, "I can get no information of the enemy other than that *sent to you*. Rumors from Pennsylvania are too confused and contradictory to be relied on. Officers and citizens are in a big stampede. They are asking me why does not *General Hooker tell where Lee's army is; he is nearest to it.*"<sup>10</sup> [emphasis added]

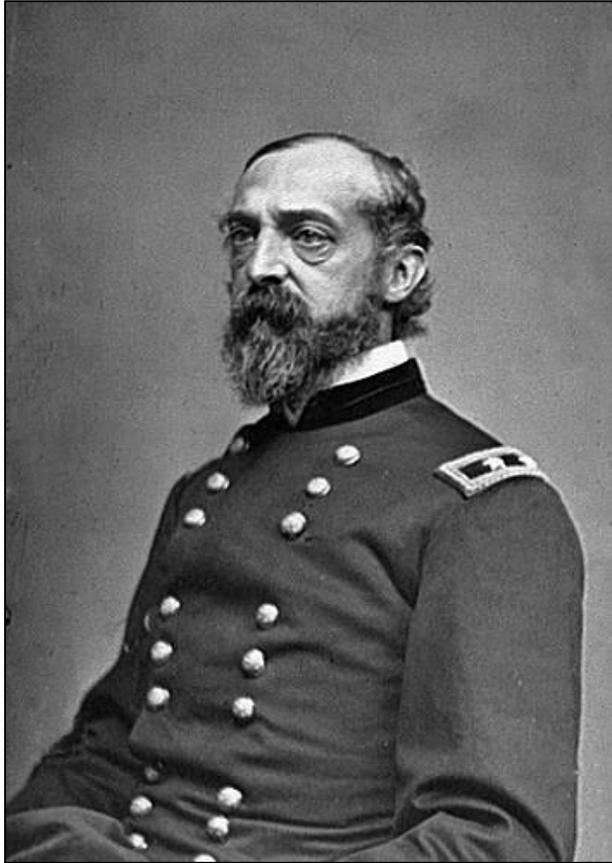
All of that changed after General Stuart departed on his mini-campaign to ride around the Union army. Valuable intelligence began to filter in from not only Union cavalry but from Union spies and sympathizers who were now able to move back and forth with greater ease. This helped clear what had been a fuzzy intelligence picture for General Hooker. On the day after General Stuart set out on his ride east, one of General Hooker's intelligence officers reported to him the following:

I learn beyond a doubt that the last of Lee's entire army has passed through Martinsburg toward the Potomac. The last of them passed Monday night. The main body are crossing at Shepherdstown. Scouts report them building a pontoon bridge at Shepherdstown. ... Nine thousand men and sixteen pieces of artillery passed through Greencastle yesterday p.m. Generals Ewell, Walker, "Extra Billy" Smith, and Hays took up their headquarters day before yesterday at house 2 miles from Shepherdstown, on the Winchester Pike. Large bodies of troops can be seen from South Mountain, at Antietam Furnace, by aid of glasses. Cavalry and pickets were drawn in this morning beyond Boonsborough. All of which may be considered as reliable.  
B. [Babcock]<sup>11</sup>

More accurate reports about Confederate movements and personnel continued to reach Hooker with Stuart's cavalry screen removed. In one General John F. Reynolds, commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, endorsed a June 27 report with the remarkably accurate note that, "General Ewell is with Early's division in person, and this column is evidently directed on Gettysburg."<sup>12</sup>

On June 27 Hooker's troubles with Halleck reached a head and he offered his resignation. Halleck and Hooker neither liked nor respected each other. Their differences came to a head over whether General Hooker should have control of the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry or not. Halleck believed he should not, and Hooker just as firmly thought he should. Generals in the field often ask for more assets, while generals at home have a tendency not to release them, for many reasons, for example, expense, use for other purposes, politics, etc. However, it is hard to believe that General Hooker did not expect his resignation to be accepted on the eve of a great battle with an enemy in Pennsylvania. By stating that, "I beg to be understood, respectfully, but firmly, that I am unable to comply with their conditions with the means at my disposal..." suggests that General Hooker understood that with an invading army in Pennsylvania, General Halleck's reluctance to place the garrison at Harpers Ferry under General Hooker could only be a ploy to get rid of Hooker by placing him in a situation such that his only recourse would be to resign. The proof of the pudding is that when the next commander was placed in command of the army Halleck wrote him the following: "All forces within the sphere of your operations will be held subject to your orders. Harpers Ferry and its garrison are under your direct order."<sup>13</sup>

Even before Hooker departed his position the search for his replacement had started. Most sages believe that the obvious choice would have been Major General John F. Reynolds. However, Reynolds chose not to accept command of the army. Most officers would agree that if you beg off a command, the chances of promotion or being asked again are virtually nil. Over the years many have speculated about the motives of Reynolds' decision. His distaste for political interference from Washington normally heads the list. However a diary entry of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, chief of 1<sup>st</sup> Corps artillery, offers another explanation. On Monday, June 29 at Emmitsburg, Maryland, General Reynolds confided to Wainwright that he had in fact been offered command of the army a month earlier while he was in Washington and that he had refused it. Wainwright states, "to use his own expression, 'he was unwilling to take Burnside and Hooker's leavings.'"<sup>14</sup>



*Major General George G. Meade. LC*

The next candidate after Reynolds was a topographical engineer born in Cadiz, Spain of American parents, a West Point graduate, Class of 1835, who had served in the Mexican War; a man who gave the appearance of a college professor more at ease in a classroom than in the field. He was George Gordon Meade. Meade learned of his appointment the morning of June 28, 1863. In his letter to his wife Margaret on June 29, General Meade informed her of the circumstances of his notification:

Yesterday morning, at 3 a.m., I was aroused from my sleep by an officer from Washington entering my tent, and after waking me up, saying he had come to give me trouble. At first I thought that it was either to relieve or arrest me... He then handed me a communication to read; which I found was an order relieving Hooker from the command and assigning me to it.<sup>15</sup>

Meade faced enormous problems: He needed to know the exact location and capabilities of Lee's army on the eve of a battle all knew was imminent. In a letter to General Halleck from Frederick, Maryland at 7 a.m. on June 28, Meade writes, "The order placing me in command of this army is received. As a soldier I obey it, and to the

utmost of my ability will execute it. Totally unexpected as it has been, and in ignorance of the exact condition of the troops and position of the enemy..."<sup>16</sup>

Further concerning Meade was the knowledge that he was probably not Lincoln or Halleck's first choice. No one can really imagine what was going through Meade's mind that morning. General Halleck probably understood the concerns and reservations that Meade felt that fateful morning, and wrote him; "General: you will receive with this the order of the President placing you in command of the Army of the Potomac. Considering the circumstances, no one ever received a more important command."<sup>17</sup>

On June 28, the same day Meade was appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, Lee was facing his own problems. All had gone well in the campaign to this point. But that began to change when a scout in the employ of General James Longstreet brought news that afternoon that the Federal army was north of the Potomac and advancing toward Pennsylvania, and that the head of the column had

reached South Mountain. General Lee now faced a major problem without cavalry on his eastern flank to protect the gaps. Continuing north to Harrisburg would be extremely dangerous, with an unknown force on his flank with the ability to move west across the gaps and cut off his line of communications and his supply and retreat route. Lee decided to concentrate east of the mountain. The command decision to concentrate the army east of the mountain would set the stage for the upcoming Battle of Gettysburg. General Lee states, “As our communications with the Potomac were thus menaced, it was resolved to prevent his further progress in that direction by concentrating our army on the east side of the mountains.”<sup>18</sup>

Lee and Meade were now on a collision course, and one of Lee’s objectives fell by the wayside: the capture of Harrisburg. Many students of the Battle of Gettysburg forget the big picture Lee had in mind: the *campaign* that was to have a military victory on northern soil resulting in a *political* resolution to the war. As an important rail hub located on the Susquehanna River, and the seat of government for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg was an ideal target. Armies are attracted to capitals. The Germans went to Paris, the Allies to Berlin, and more recently, the U.S. troops went to Baghdad.

The anxiety being felt by state officials and citizens in Harrisburg is best captured by a special order by the adjutant general of Pennsylvania, A.L. Russell, written June 30, when it was expected that Harrisburg would be attacked by Lee’s army.

All persons residents of the City of Harrisburg or vicinity unattached to any military organization, to whom arms or ammunition, or either, have lately been issued from the Harrisburg State Arsenal, or who are in possession of arms belonging to the State, will immediately attach themselves to a military organization to report to there [sic] headquarters, or return the arms and other State property in their hands to the arsenal.

By order of A.G. Curtin,  
Governor and Commander-in-Chief...<sup>19</sup>

One can only speculate what impact the capture of Harrisburg would have on the political-military equation being played out at the time. However General Meade’s army was now gaining momentum and exerting influence on Lee’s center of gravity.

By 8:15 P.M. the very evening General Meade was placed in command, he had begun to develop a picture of Lee’s army and location. Based on Meade’s cavalry information and the information of civilians and the Bureau of Military Information, Meade was able to pen General Halleck the following from Frederick: “There seems to be no doubt that 3,000 of the enemies’ cavalry have been in our right, between us and Washington, to-day. [This was Stuart’s cavalry on their ride around the army’s eastern flank]. My intention is now to move to-morrow on lines to Emmitsburg and Westminster, having the army on the road from Emmitsburg through Westminster ...”<sup>20</sup> Civilian sources also helped Meade form a picture of Lee’s dispositions. He sent the following statement to Halleck on the 28<sup>th</sup>:

Thomas McCamaron, blacksmith...from Hagerstown, left there on horseback at 11 A.M. to-day. Rebel Cavalry came first a week ago last Monday. General [A.G.] Jenkins having 1,200 mounted infantry ... and the first infantry came yesterday a week ago – General Ewell’s men. He came personally last Saturday, and was at the Catholic Church Sunday, with General Rodes and two other generals ... all of Longstreet’s command passed through excepting two brigades. Saw Longstreet yesterday. He and Lee had their headquarters at Mr. [James H] Grove’s, just beyond town limits, toward Greencastle, last night and left there this A.M. at 8 o’clock. Think A. P. Hill went through last Tuesday.<sup>21</sup>

To his wife, on June 29, Meade explained that the army was, “marching on fast as we can to relieve Harrisburg, but have to keep a sharp lookout that the rebels don't turn around us and get at Washington and Baltimore in our rear. They have a cavalry force in our rear...”<sup>22</sup> Meade appreciated the importance of covering Washington and Baltimore with the army, as well as the impact Harrisburg’s

capture, even if temporary, would have on northern morale. Toward that end it appears that Meade was attempting to force Lee to turn away from Harrisburg and make his army the target. For that to be successful a plan was needed that determined where to fight and whether the fight would be offensive or defensive in nature.

While Meade looked, “to his own army and [to] assume position for offensive or defensive, as occasion requires,”<sup>23</sup> Lee had ordered A.P. Hill and Longstreet to concentrate at Cashtown, on the eastern slope of South Mountain. He gave Ewell the discretion to “either move directly on Gettysburg or turn down to Cashtown.”<sup>24</sup> General Lee wrote in his preliminary report of July 31, 1863, “It had not been intended to fight a general battle at such a distance from our base, unless attacked by the enemy ...”<sup>25</sup> Lee was not ready to offer battle until his army had concentrated. Ewell made that clear in his report filed that year: “I notified the general commanding of my movements, and was informed by him that, in case we found the enemy force very large, he did not want a general engagement brought on till the rest of the army came up.”<sup>26</sup>

Lee had sound reasons to be cautious. First, without cavalry leading the army east, Lee would be blinded in terms of the lay of the land and the disposition and quantity of Union forces in his front. Second, by remaining at the Cashtown gap with the bulk of his force protected by South Mountain and his line of communication safe from interdiction, Lee could retain several options. He could fight a battle over terrain with which he was now familiar. He could buy time and wait for Stuart’s return. Or he could leave a blocking force at the gap and continue to Harrisburg.

All this changed the morning of July 1 when two divisions of Hill’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps lumbered east along the Chambersburg pike to Gettysburg. Hill was an uncommonly aggressive soldier but Gettysburg was his first battle in command of an army corps, and on July 1 he behaved as if were still commanding a division rather than a corps. After the war, Lee still referred to Hill as a division officer, which gives some insight into the highest level of command of which Lee felt Hill was capable. The movement of these two divisions along the Chambersburg pike that morning was destined to commit Lee’s entire army to fight a battle not of his choosing in location or time.

While Henry Heth’s division, with William D. Pender’s division in support, was making contact with the vanguard of Meade’s army the morning of July 1, what plans had Meade developed to meet such a threat? Meade had been developing contingency plans to fight an offensive or defensive battle. Ideally Meade wished to fight in Maryland behind a line he had selected that followed Pipe Creek. The position was a strong one, situated along a ridge with the creek in its front. It possessed the additional advantage of allowing Meade to offer battle close his base of supplies at Westminster, only about fifteen miles to the south. To that end Meade issued a circular known as the “Pipe Creek Circular” on July 1 at Taneytown, Maryland. Much controversy has arisen over the years concerning whether Reynolds ever received this circular when he made his decision to engaged A. P. Hill’s advance that morning at Gettysburg. Whether Reynolds received the circular or not, the evidence indicates that it was not Reynolds intention to commit the Army of the Potomac to battle at Gettysburg when he made his decision to meet Hill’s advance. Based on the correspondence between Reynolds and Meade, it is evident that Reynolds was fully aware of Meade’s intent to prepare a battlefield somewhere south of Gettysburg and in fact approved of this and had actually instructed his subordinate, Major General Abner Doubleday, of his intent to fall back to a defensible position that very morning.<sup>27</sup>

The limitation on the scope of this paper requires me to treat this important point in a somewhat abridged fashion, with the hope that a more definitive paper will be produced on this crucial topic in the future. But my conclusion is based upon contemporary documents and



*Major General John F. Reynolds.  
LC*

correspondence written as the events were unfolding rather than post battle reports and reminiscences that are often colored by hindsight.

Meade and Reynolds understood how things might change in war, and while Reynolds may not have received Meade's Pipe Creek order on July 1, based on the correspondence and orders issued up to June 30, it seems evident the two generals had come to an understanding. Reynolds was one of the officers who came to pay their respects to Meade on June 28, after his appointment to command the army. Meade's son recalled, "Reynolds visited him, to tender his congratulations, and to assure him of his hearty support. They were on that occasion long in consultation, and the commander general *fully* explained to him his plan as far as they could be formed."<sup>28</sup>

Barely eight months after the battle, on March 22, 1864, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps commander Major General Winfield Hancock, gave sworn testimony to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War relating to Reynolds actions on July 1. Hancock said, "General Reynolds, who at Gettysburg was really a mask, in order to allow this movement (occupying the line of Pike Creek) to go on in his rear."<sup>29</sup> Meade had briefed Hancock on his plans and understood his commander's intent in the army's advance to contact. He told the committee, "On the morning of the 1<sup>st</sup> of July I received an order to march to Taneytown. I arrived there about eleven o'clock ... I then went to the headquarters of General Meade ... While I was there General Meade told me all his plans. He said he had made up his mind to fight a battle on what was known as Pipe Creek. ..."<sup>30</sup>

Not only was Meade's intent sworn to by Hancock eight months after the event, but is further evidenced by the unusual appointment of Hancock on July 1 when Meade learned that Reynolds was either incapacitated or dead. Meade gave Hancock unprecedented power by ordering him to Gettysburg to assume command of the three corps in the area regardless of seniority of the officers already present. Dated July 1 at 1:10 P.M., the orders state, "You assume command of the corps there assembled, viz, the Eleventh, First, and Third at Emmitsburg. If you think the ground and position there a better one to fight a battle under existing circumstances, you will so advise the General ... You know the Generals views..."<sup>31</sup>

Hancock's wrote to Meade at 5:25 P.M. the evening of July 1, after arriving on the battlefield and assessing the situation. He wrote, "We have now taken up a position in the cemetery, which cannot well be taken. It is a position however, easily turned ... I think we can retire; if not we can fight here ..."<sup>32</sup> This implies that Hancock understood Meade's intent to retire to the Pipe Creek line.

Other pieces of evidence exist to support the premise that Reynolds was ordered and understood that he was to fall back slowly, and that he intended to fight in such a way as to contest the ground, giving Meade time to prepare a battlefield in the rear, and to lure Lee's army in a trap. Meade's Assistant Adjuvant General Seth Williams wrote in a memo dated July 1 to 6<sup>th</sup> Corp Commander John Sedgwick, "... the enemy is moving in heavy force on Gettysburg ... should such be the case, and General Reynolds finds himself in the presence of a superior force, he is instructed to hold the enemy in check, and fall slowly back."<sup>33</sup>

In addition to Hancock's testimony and Williams' correspondence to Sedgwick, we can turn to a letter written by Reynolds himself on June 30, the day before the battle began.

I think if the enemy advances in force from Gettysburg, and we are to fight a defensive battle in this vicinity, that the position to be occupied is just north of the town of Emmitsburg, covering the plank road to Taneytown ... the position taken up under the orders to march to Marsh Creek. I have not changed it, or it might be necessary to dispute the advance of the enemy across this creek, in order to take up the position behind Middle Creek, which is the one I alluded to near Emmitsburg.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to this evidence there are three more points to consider. When Meade assigned Reynolds to command the army's Right Wing (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Corps) on June 30, Reynolds placed his senior division commander, Major General Doubleday in acting command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps. Since Doubleday would be leading the corps, it made sense for Reynolds to share his intent with Doubleday on

the eve of an impending battle. In his official report of December 14, 1863, General Doubleday records this amazing and compelling piece of information:

On the 29<sup>th</sup> ... arrive at Emmitsburg; passed through that place, and bivouacked for the night on the height to the north. This position had been carefully selected by General Reynolds as a defense line. ... On the 30<sup>th</sup>, we marched a short march of 3 or 4 miles to Marsh Creek, where we again took up a defensive position. ... It was General Reynolds' intention to dispute the enemy's advance at this point, falling back however, in case of a serious attack, to the ground already chosen at Emmitsburg.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, Reynolds' intent the morning of July 1 was that if attacked by a superior force he would fall back while disputing the ground to a prepared position in the rear. An additional piece of evidence is a note from Meade to Hancock dated July 1 at 1:10 P.M. Meade, having learned that Reynolds had been killed or wounded, advised Hancock, "... the possible failure of General Reynolds to receive the order to withdraw his command by the route through Taneytown, thus leaving the center of our position open, that you proceed with your troops out on the direct road to Gettysburg from Taneytown. When you find that General Reynolds is covering that road (*instead of withdrawing by Emmitsburg, which it is feared he may do*) you will withdraw to Frizellburg, *as directed in the circular of directions for the positions issued this morning.*<sup>36</sup>" [emphasis added]

This lends great weight to the idea that Reynolds understood he was to fall back if attacked, and that Meade was concerned that Reynolds *now* needed to know to fall back on a *different line* than was contained in the Pipe Creek Circular issued *that* morning, which Reynolds *may not* have received. One final point concerning Brigadier General John Buford: His orders written the morning of the battle were, "The Major-General commanding directs me to order you to fall back to Taneytown ... in case the enemy should advance in force upon you and press you hard. The cavalry will dispute every inch of the ground, and fall back very slowly to the point designated."<sup>37</sup>

Despite the fact that General Lee admonished his corps commanders against becoming heavily engaged, General Hill sent two divisions to Gettysburg the morning of July 1. In light of the fact that Hill's corps was now the vanguard of the eastern movement of Lee's army without a cavalry screen, one has to wonder about the propriety of sending two-thirds of his corps into an unknown situation. Henry Heth wrote in his after-action report dated September 13, 1863 just how poor the intelligence picture was: "It may not be improper to remark that at this time -- 9: o'clock on the morning of July 1 -- I was ignorant what force was at or near Gettysburg ..."<sup>38</sup> In effect Hill used his two infantry divisions as a reconnaissance force, and once they became engaged it was difficult for them to disengage. This was further complicated by the absence of Hill, who remained behind at Cashtown. With two-thirds of his corps advancing into an unknown situation, it was incumbent upon Hill to be at the tip of the sword, to be able to disengage once it became clear that a significant force was present. Hill's command decision to allow his divisions to advance toward Gettysburg without his supervision caused them to become engaged with a force of unknown size and for this to escalate into a full-scale battle. The responsibility for this rests squarely on Hill's shoulders.

General Buford had formed a very accurate intelligence picture by the morning of July 1 and reported this information in a timely fashion to his superiors. Intelligence is no good if it is not passed along in a timely manner. Carl von Clausewitz once said that intelligence is like eggs -- the fresher the better. At 10:40 P.M. the previous night Buford reported, "... A.P. Hill's corps composed of Anderson, Heth, and Pender, is massed back of Cashtown, nine miles from this place ... Ewell is coming over the mountain from Carlisle ... Rodes, commanding a division of Ewell's, has already crossed the mountains from Carlisle. ... I have kept General Reynolds informed of all that has transpired."<sup>39</sup> It seems evident that the morning of July 1 General Reynolds had an idea of the size of the enemy force he would be facing, in contrast to Henry Heth.

The Battle of Gettysburg began, according to Buford's report, between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M. By 10:00 A.M. Reynolds was in the thick of the fight on McPherson's Ridge, positioning the leading element

of his 1<sup>st</sup> Corps in Herbst Woods, when according to Doubleday, around 10:15 A.M. Reynolds was shot and killed. With Reynolds' death the battle appeared to spiral out of control so as to prompt Buford to write on that afternoon, "In my opinion, there seems to be no directing person."<sup>40</sup> With the sudden death of Reynolds the entire burden of command now rested squarely on Doubleday's shoulders. The ground west of Gettysburg was not suitable to commit the army to battle nor in the approximately two hours between the beginning of the battle and his death could Reynolds' attention been anywhere but on the unexpected encounter with the enemy. So the battle on July 1 took on a life of its own.

Somewhere between 11 A.M. and 12 P.M. the two brigades of Heth's division pulled back approximately one mile from where the main battle had been raging on McPherson's Ridge, probably because of the stiff resistance they encountered. They had no idea they were bumping into the vanguard of the enemy's army, and the heat and casualties were beginning to have an effect on the attacking force. It is important to remember that up to this time neither Lee nor Hill had arrived. Major General Howard, commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> corps, arrived and placed a division on Cemetery Hill in Gettysburg and threw his other two divisions north of the town in an attempt to link up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps. The fact that Howard left a division on Cemetery Hill suggests that he placed some value on that piece of real estate, however there is no conclusive evidence that anyone else ordered him to do this. In fact Howard states, "...*I came to the conclusion* that the only tenable position for my limited force was the ridge to the southeast of Gettysburg, now so well known as Cemetery ridge."<sup>41</sup> I do not believe Howard could have organized an effective retreat to the prepared position in his rear. That is one of the most difficult feats a general can perform in war, as Baron De Jomini states:

Retreats are certainly the most difficult operations in war. ... when we think of the physical and moral condition of an army in full retreat ... if the difficulty of preserving order, out of the disasters to which disorder may lead, it is not hard to understand why the most experienced generals have hesitated to attempt said operation.<sup>42</sup>

Between General Reynolds' untimely death and Howard's deployment of a division on Cemetery Hill, the die had been cast. It would take a commander who could not only mount a skillful retreat in the face of an aggressive enemy, but whose presence could inspire his troops, and that presence had not yet arrived. By 1 P.M. on July 1, not only had Meade been informed of Reynolds' death, but he had decided to send Major General Hancock to Gettysburg to assume command of the forces there, regardless of seniority. Hancock was to make the call whether the ground there appeared to be favorable for a battle. This is the first time Meade had begun to think about the possibility of committing the army to battle at Gettysburg. Hancock's orders were, in part: "If you think the ground and position there a better one to fight a battle under existing circumstances you will so advise the General, and he will order all the troops up. You know the General's view..."<sup>43</sup> However by 1 P.M. the battle had erupted once more with the arrival of Robert Rodes' division of Lieutenant Richard Ewell's 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps.<sup>44</sup>

A little after 1 P.M. on July 1 Rodes' division renewed the battle by attacking from the vicinity of a wooded hill known as Oak Hill due north and on the right flank of the Union 1<sup>st</sup> Corps position. The ground and position seemed to have been made to order for Rodes' men. If this were a naval battle it would be referred to as crossing the "T." Rodes in his reports writes, "On arriving on the field, I found that by keeping along the wooded ridge ... I could strike the force of the enemy ... upon the flank, and that, besides moving under cover, whenever we struck the enemy we could engage him with the advantage in ground."<sup>45</sup> It appears that from all accounts Lee's intent not to bring on a major battle was at best being overlooked.

Sometime after Rodes' attack commenced General Lee arrived. General Heth, according to protocol, approached him and requested permission to support Rodes by attacking with his own division. Lee refused, saying "I do not wish to bring on a general engagement today..."<sup>46</sup> So despite the fact that Heth's men were heavily engaged that morning and the fact that Rodes' division had now re-opened the battle from an ideal position, General Lee's intent was still not to bring on an engagement that day. It appears that the Confederate generals were all in the same church, but sitting in different pews.

Reluctantly, about an hour later Lee gave Heth permission to attack when he observed the Union 1<sup>st</sup> Corps shifting troops to meet Rodes' threat from the north. Lee saw no other choice but to commit Heth to the battle lest his forces be defeated in detail. At around 3 P.M., Jubal Early's division of Ewell's 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps had arrived under the command of Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early. This division struck the extreme flank of Howard's 11<sup>th</sup> Corps on an eminence today known as Barlow 's Knoll along the Old Harrisburg pike.<sup>47</sup> The Union army, now out-numbered and out-positioned, began falling back through the town of Gettysburg to where the reserves of Howard's corps were located on Cemetery Hill. Now began one of the most complicated and demanding aspects of any battle: the successful pursuit of a defeated enemy.

As the Union 11<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> corps retreated to Cemetery Hill, it was apparent to Lee that he must destroy this portion of the Army of the Potomac. Lee did not chose this battlefield, but his army was now successful, and it was absolutely critical to his overall campaign strategy to finish the job began by others this day. According to Major General Isaac R. Trimble in a conversation with General Lee, Lee expressed the opinion that he would throw "...an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it, follow up the success, drive one corps back on another and by successive repulses and surprises before they can concentrate; create a panic and virtually destroy the army."<sup>48</sup>

According to the tactics of the day Lee needed an asset of his army to pursue this defeated enemy before it could re-group - Stuart's cavalry. Without cavalry the only troops Lee could muster were the same infantry now jaded by twelve hours of marching and combat. It did not take long for the infantry pursuit to grind to a halt. General Lee lost approximately 6,800 on the first day of the battle, or



*Major General Winfield S. Hancock. LC*

approximately one quarter of his forces engaged.<sup>49</sup> Today, if you lost more than 20 percent of the forces engaged, the unit would be combat ineffective. Lee's infantry were also encumbered by nearly 3,500 Union prisoners, who had to be disarmed and secured, which consumed valuable time and men.<sup>50</sup> Time on a battlefield can never be regained, and as a consequence, opportunities are lost. In addition to all of this, Lee issued an order to General Ewell, often selectively cited by Ewell's critics, which helped to take the momentum out of the pursuit. Lee's order to Ewell was, "General Ewell was therefore, instructed to carry the hill occupied by the enemy, if he found it practical, *but* to avoid a general engagement until the arrival of the other divisions of the army which were ordered to hasten forward."<sup>51</sup> Many students and historians of the battle have chosen to cite the first part of the order only, but it is the second part of his instruction to Ewell that caused the army to come to a halt.

During the period of Lee's pursuit until the time it had petered out around at 5 P.M., General Hancock arrived on the field and skillfully helped organize the defense of Cemetery Hill, to the extent that Hancock could pen to Meade at 5:25 P.M. the following: "We have now taken up a position in the Cemetery, and cannot well be taken."<sup>52</sup> However, Hancock had major reservations about the position, as he further states in his *dispatch* to Meade, "It is a position, however, easily turned."<sup>53</sup> So, in Hancock's opinion, that evening the position at Gettysburg may not have been appropriate for a battle by Meade's army. Hancock went on to state that, "I think we can retire; if not, we can fight here, as the ground appears not unfavorable with *good* troops."<sup>54</sup> Hancock was giving Meade

the opportunity of either committing the army to Gettysburg or falling back to its prepared position. This suggests that Hancock had not felt Gettysburg was a position that he could confidently recommend to Meade as a site for a battle, given the fact that there was a position in the rear being prepared along Pipe Creek. When Meade arrived at 1 A.M. the morning of July 2, he decided to commit the army to Gettysburg, although he expressed as late as 3 P.M. on July 2 his reservations with the Gettysburg position.

Between 5 and 6 P.M. the night of July 1, Lieutenant James Longstreet arrived and expressed reservations about attacking the next day. However Lee too now made the command decision to commit the army to battle on July 2 at Gettysburg.

The outcome of this decision would result in the destruction of the offensive capabilities of Lee's army. Although the war would end after two more long and agonizing years, the re-fighting of the battle of Gettysburg and the command decisions and failures that led to it will continue far into the future. In the immortal words of President Abraham Lincoln, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (CITY: The Free Press, 1966), 213.

<sup>2</sup> *Register of Graduates and Former Cadets of the United States Military Academy* (1804-1964).

<sup>3</sup> *OR*, 27(2):305.

<sup>4</sup> *OR*, 25(2):4.

<sup>5</sup> *OR*, 27(1):32.

<sup>6</sup> *OR*, 27(2):305.

<sup>7</sup> *Correspondence de Napoléon I.* (Paris, 1854-1869), Vol. #:428.

<sup>8</sup> *OR*, 27(3):923.

<sup>9</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 119.

<sup>10</sup> *OR*, 27(1):50.

<sup>11</sup> *OR*, 27 (3):285-286.

<sup>12</sup> *OR*, 27(3):352.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861-1865* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 229.

<sup>15</sup> George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade Major-General United States Army* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 2:11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *OR*, 27(2):307.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>20</sup> *OR*, 27(1):64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Meade, 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> *OR*, 27(3):415.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 943.

<sup>25</sup> *OR*, 27(2):308.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>27</sup> *OR*, 27(3):416.

<sup>28</sup> Meade, 33.

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- <sup>29</sup> Bill Hyde, ed., *The Union Generals Speak: The Meade Hearing on the Battle of Gettysburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 207.
- <sup>30</sup> Hyde, 207.
- <sup>31</sup> *OR*, 27(3):461.
- <sup>32</sup> *OR*, 27(1):366.
- <sup>33</sup> *OR*, 27(3):462.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 417-418.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.
- <sup>38</sup> *OR*, 27(2):637.
- <sup>39</sup> *OR*, 27(1):924.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 925.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 702.
- <sup>42</sup> Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1862), 211.
- <sup>43</sup> *OR*, 27(3):461.
- <sup>44</sup> *OR*, 27(2):552.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> James L. Morrison, Jr., ed., *The Memoirs of Henry Heth*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 175.
- <sup>47</sup> *OR*, 27(2):468-469.
- <sup>48</sup> Isaac R. Trimble, "The Battle and Campaigns of Gettysburg," *Southern Historical Society Papers* (Richmond, Virginia: Southern Historical Society, 1898), vol. 26.
- <sup>49</sup> John Busey and David Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Gateway Press, 1982), 152, 172.
- <sup>50</sup> *OR*, 27(2):307.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.
- <sup>52</sup> *OR*, 27(1):366.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*