

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

GETT.124
CRBIB#001770
305/131509

Gettysburg National Military Park
(Area)

FILE CODE:

Strategy Proposed by Longstreet
for the
Gettysburg Campaign

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FROM:

TO:

STRATEGY PROPOSED BY LONGSTREET FOR THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

Longstreet advocated a Pennsylvania campaign which, as he termed it, would be "offensive in strategy but defensive in tactics".

In such a campaign the Army of Northern Virginia was to advance into the North, menace Washington and other cities and then take up a position which the Union army would be forced to attack and be defeated.

It was believed that such an operation would not only capitalize on the Army of Northern Virginia's presumed superior leadership and skill at maneuver, but would compensate for its inferior strength. In support of this strategy, Fredericksburg was cited as a battle employing defensive tactics in which the fruits of victory were gained at little loss in contrast to Chancellorsville, an offensive but Pyrrhic victory.¹

Longstreet submitted this plan to General Lee shortly after his return to the Fredericksburg, Virginia, area from Suffolk on May 9, 1863. He had just advanced a plan whereby his corps would have been detached and sent to Tennessee to aid Bragg, but this plan was not adopted. Instead, Lee resolved to keep his army together and, with it, invade Maryland and Pennsylvania. After the projected Pennsylvania campaign had been decided upon, Longstreet temporarily abandoned his hope of going west and offered the above plan of offensive strategy and defensive tactics.²

Lee apparently listened to Longstreet's ideas with courtesy, interest and possibly some nods of approval, for Longstreet left their first talks with the notion that Lee had approved of and adopted his plan. It apparently was mentioned again in the course of a conversation that included Lee, Longstreet and Ewell at which Longstreet, assuming

that his suggestion would be followed, thought to school Ewell in what was to happen by the oblique method of discussing the possibility of fighting an offensive battle near Culpepper, Virginia.³

The Army moved north and made contact with the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg. As the first day's fighting ended, Longstreet approached the field and joined General Lee on Seminary Ridge. Both surveyed the Union position on Cemetery Hill through their binoculars and, after a few minutes, Longstreet lowered his glasses. He remarked that the Federal forces on Cemetery Hill were conforming to his plan and that all that the Confederates need do was to move to the south around the Union left, get between the Federals and Washington, take up a strong position and wait. If the Federals did not attack, Lee could select another position closer to Washington and withdraw to it. The Federals would then be certain to attack and could be defeated as at Fredericksburg.⁴

Longstreet's feeling that Lee had adopted his plan of operations here gains some support for, in his report of the campaign, Lee wrote that he had not intended to fight a major battle so far from his base unless attacked. He then went on to give reasons why he was forced to attack: To withdraw in the presence of the Federal Army would have been difficult and dangerous and the Confederates could not await attack because the situation was unfavorable to the collection of supplies. Furthermore, their successes on July 1 gave them great hope of victory. Five years later Lee denied the suggestion that he had ever made a promise to Longstreet not to fight an offensive battle in the course of the campaign.⁵

This scene was witnessed by Colonel A. L. Long, Lee's Military

Secretary, who wrote that Lee and Longstreet conversed about the relative positions of the two armies and the moves to be made. Then, "Longstreet gave it as his opinion that the best plan would be to turn Meade's left flank and force him back to the vicinity of Pipeclay Pipe Creek. To this General Lee objected, and pronounced it impractical under the circumstances".⁶

General Lee further stated that if the Union forces remained in position there on the following day he would attack them. Longstreet continued to argue his point, but, seeing that it was to no avail, rode off determined to try again on the following morning.⁷

Longstreet returned to Lee's headquarters early on July 2 and again presented his views to no avail. Longstreet saw Lee later during the day at the time of his march to the right flank, but there is no record of his plans having been discussed at that time. An opportunity may have presented itself when Generals Law and Hood sought permission to turn Round Top, but Longstreet did not see fit to contact Lee and the Confederate attack was launched as ordered.⁸

Longstreet next saw Lee on the following morning, July 3, when Lee visited his headquarters. Prior to Lee's arrival, Longstreet reported that he had developed plans for renewing the attack that day by passing around the Round Tops in order to take the Union left in the flank and rear. As Lee rode up, Longstreet reported that he had had scouts out during the night and had learned that there was still excellent opportunity for Lee to send his forces to the right. Lee, however, refused to accept the suggestion, reiterated his resolution to attack the Union forces on Cemetery Ridge and ordered Pickett's Division prepared for the assault now commonly known as "Pickett's Charge". Long-

street's plans for a campaign that was "offensive in strategy but defensive in tactics" thus failed to materialize.⁹

The information on the Longstreet plan to assume the strategic offensive and tactical defensive, with the exception of Colonel Long's and Colonel Marshall's brief references, has been supplied by Longstreet himself. As indicated, it has been written in his own campaign history, From Manassas to Appomattox, in his contributions to Battles and Leaders and in his comments on the campaign as printed in the Philadelphia Times and reported in Southern Historical Society Papers. Although Longstreet may have given some favorable elaboration to them as a result of hindsight, there is no reason for believing that his accounts are not substantially correct, particularly since they are supported to some extent by Colonel Long, Colonel Marshall, Lee's report of the campaign and Longstreet's campaign report. One staff officer, Colonel Taylor, expressed ignorance of Longstreet's desire not to give battle at Gettysburg, but since he may not have been present during the discussion on the field, his lack of knowledge of Longstreet's attitude need not necessarily be pertinent.¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. "General James Longstreet's Account of the Campaign and Battle" of Gettysburg, Southern Historical Society Papers, Volumes V and VI. (The copies of this article on file at Gettysburg National Military Park contain no page numbers. This account will hereafter be referred to as "Longstreet, SHSP".) James Longstreet, "Lee's Invasion of Pennsylvania", Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. III, p. 246. (Hereafter, this and another article by Longstreet in Volume III entitled "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg" will both be indicated by the abbreviation "Longstreet, B and L" with the page number.)
2. James Longstreet, From Manassas to Appomattox, pp. 330-331; Longstreet, B and L, pp. 245-246 and Longstreet, SHSP.
3. Longstreet, op. cit., p. 331 and Longstreet, B and L, p. 249.
4. Longstreet, B and L, p. 339; Longstreet, op. cit., p. 558 and Longstreet, SHSP.
5. Longstreet, op. cit., p. 358; Longstreet, B and L, p. 339; War of the Rebellion: Official Records . . ., Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, p. 318 and Douglas S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. III, p. 107.
6. A. L. Long, Memoirs of Robert E. Lee, p. 277. This conversation is also reported in Frederick Maurice, Ed., An Aide-de-Camp of Lee, p. 232.
7. Longstreet, B and L, p. 340 and Longstreet, SHSP.
8. E. M. Law, "The Struggle for Round Top", Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. III, p. 322; Longstreet, B and L, p. 340; Longstreet, SHSP and Maurice, op. cit., p. 233.
9. War of the Rebellion: Official Records . . ., Vol. 27, Pt. 2, p. 359; Longstreet, B and L, p. 342 and Longstreet, SHSP.
10. Walter H. Taylor, Four Years with Lee, p. 101.

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