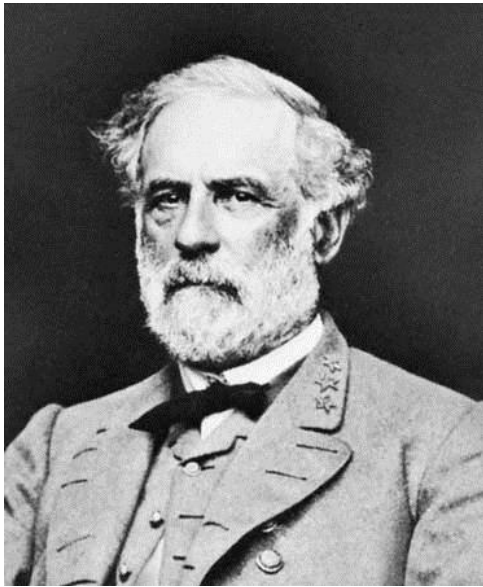


The Shadow of Napoleon upon Lee at Gettysburg

Charles Teague



Robert E. Lee, 1865 (LOC)

Every general commanding an army hopes to win the next battle. Some will dream that they might accomplish a decisive victory, and in this Robert E. Lee was no different. By the late spring of 1863 he already had notable successes in battlefield trials. But now, over two years into a devastating war, he was looking to destroy the military force that would again oppose him, thereby assuring an end to the war to the benefit of the Confederate States of America.

In the late spring of 1863 he embarked upon an audacious plan that necessitated a huge vulnerability: uncovering the capital city of Richmond. His speculation, which proved prescient, was that the Union army that lay between the two capitals would be directed to pursue and block him as he advanced north of the Potomac River. He would thereby draw it out of

entrenched defensive positions held along the Rappahannock River and into the open, stretched out by marching. He expected that force to risk a battle against his Army of Northern Virginia, one that could bring a Federal defeat such that the cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington might succumb, morale in the North to continue the war would plummet, and the South could achieve its true independence.

One of Lee's major generals would later explain that Lee told him in the march to battle of his goal to destroy the Union army. Another wrote of Lee's expressed intention to ruin his enemy. And after the war, the then-President of Washington College confided to a former officer and current faculty member that it had indeed been his expectation that he could do so.

In a war in which dozens of battles had already been fought, such a possibility seemed unlikely. The only person in recent world history to have done so on a grand scale was Napoleon Bonaparte, and that was decades earlier. Yet that idea was being nurtured in the mind of R.E. Lee.

It is common among strategic military thinkers and researchers to reference Lee's efforts at reapplying Bonaparte's principles during the Gettysburg Campaign. Three examples shall suffice: "The fulfillment of Lee's design demanded a climactic, Napoleonic battle," wrote respected military historian Russell Weigley. Likewise, noted Larry Addington: "He believed

that the war could only be won by carrying it to the soil of the North and there winning Napoleonic victories..." And two other renowned analysts, Thomas Connelly & Archer Jones, reflected upon the "...the Napoleonic-Jominian strategy grasp he displayed" in that campaign. Bonaparte was repeatedly successful not only in winning battle, but doing so decisively, a goal imagined by Lee. Such teasers naturally raise the question, how so?¹



Napoleon Bonaparte, who influenced military theory throughout the 19th Century. (New York Public Library)

Napoleon revolutionized armed combat on a massive scale. Scholars of succeeding generations would stand in awe of him. Frederic Louis Huidekoper raved that "strategy... attained its zenith in Napoleon." Cyril Falls described him as being "of the highest genius," one who did in fact "transform war." Peter Paret wrote of him as having "no parallel," commanding with "profound" impact.²

These are not belated assessments, but echoes of earlier judgments. The most respected of early 19th Century writers touted the value of using Bonaparte as a model for war. Baron Simon Francois Gay de Vernon, an instructor in the *École* "polytechnique" (founded by Napoleon) did so in writing an influential treatise in 1805, translated into English in 1817. Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini became famous in his interpretation of Napoleon. And from West Point, Dennis Hart Mahan, having sojourned in France 1826-30 to study the great master, became an American exponent, writing that to Bonaparte "we owe those grand features of the art [of war], by which an enemy is broken and utterly

dispersed by one and the same blow." Carl von Clausewitz later summarized his impact, declaring "...all methods formerly usual were upset" by him.³

Americans who delve into a study of the Civil War are often surprised at the French nomenclature everywhere apparent: caisson, corps, campaign, forage, bivouac, echelon, hors-de-combat, enfilade, aide-de-camp, chevron, lunette, abatis, élan, redoubt, deploy, vidette, chausser, epaulette, prolonge, kepi, defilade, palisade, etc. That is understandable through Mahan's explanation that "the systems of tactics in use in our service are those of the French." And this is entirely due to Bonaparte and his various interpreters. And the awe in which he was held was broadly based. Allen Nevins wryly commented, "All the younger generals then fancied themselves embryonic Napoleons and cultivated Napoleonic rescripts, except a few who thought themselves Wellington." Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1815) had commanded in more than fifty battles, most of them stunning victories. How so? "If I were to write of my campaigns people would indeed be astonished to see that... my judgment and abilities were always exercised only in conformity with principles."⁴

The Education of Robert E. Lee in Napoleonic Principles

When Cadet R.E. Lee entered the United States Military Academy, it was modeled after the *École* “polytechnique,” the French academy designed by Bonaparte for the education of his officers. Five of the first six books Lee drew out of the West Point library concerned Napoleon. Notably, they were written in French, a required language taught at the academy but one that Lee had already mastered (his grades in each of his three years of French studies were over 98).

And it wasn’t simply a personal interest for Lee at West Point. Thirteen textbooks used in his classes were either in French, or English translations from the French. Indeed, Gay de Vernon’s *Treatise on the Science of War and Fortification* had become a mainstay at the academy. Mahan was during this time on his academic furlough to France, although his exacting framework for military studies based upon Napoleon had already been set. Weigley offers a revealing statement about the U.S. Military Academy in that era: “So strong was the magnetic attraction of Napoleon to nineteenth century soldiers that American military experience, including the generalship of Washington, was almost ignored in military studies here.”⁵

Upon graduation in 1829, Lee was assigned as an aide to General Charles Chouteau Gratiot. Regrettably, we have little accounting of what happened in their experience together. Gratiot apparently maintained old-world contacts, as his daughter married the Marquis de Montholon-Sémonville, who under Napoleon III became French Ambassador to the United States. The general and lieutenant shared a keen interest in Bonaparte, and one can only suppose their conversations that may have taken place on the subject of his battles. As a key staff officer under Winfield Scott, Lee had an immediate involvement in war though Mexico. Scott himself had traveled to France in 1817-18 to study French military methods, and had translated some manuals from Napoleon’s army into English, though it is unclear how that may have influenced his strategy against Mexico. The principals of Napoleon had little application to subsequent Indian Wars, but Lee kept handy his personal copy of the 1838 edition of Jomini’s *Précis de l’Art de la Guerre*.

Upon assignment in 1852 to become Superintendent at West Point, Lee had an opportunity to ponder the broader art of war as framed by Bonaparte. He corresponded with Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte and engaged in earnest discussion on the subject with Mahan. Indeed, the latter led a Napoleon Club for the small faculty and leading cadets with apparent participation by Lee, who designated a large room at the Academy for the display of Napoleonic campaign and battle maps.⁶

Douglas Southall Freeman summarized Lee’s keen interest in Napoleon while Superintendent:

“Of the fifteen books specifically related to war [borrowed from the Academy library at the time] seven concerned Napoleon. His principle study was of Gourgaud’s and Montholon’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de France sous Napoleon...* There is every reason to assume that he read these volumes carefully and that he became reasonably conversant with Napoleon’s military career... In the editions he probably used [were] Napoleon’s lengthy notes on *Considerations sur l’Art de la Guerre...*”⁷



West Point Military Academy in 1850, during the era of Lee's appointment as Superintendent. (LOC)

Lee was then not alone in his focus of Napoleon, as Peter Paret wrote, for the maxims of Napoleon were for West Pointers to be “etch[ed] in granite.” But Lee learned them as well as any.⁸

Another officer finely attuned to Napoleon was Thomas J. Jackson, who kept his personal copy of Napoleon’s *Maxims of War* (published in Richmond) with him on campaign. Weigley observed, “Lee and Jackson were not so much disciples of Dennis Mahan or Jomini or of other interpreters of Napoleon than of Bonaparte himself.” Together, according to Weigley, they drew “more aggressive strategic concepts” from Napoleon than any other American commanders, with Lee developing “the most skillfully Napoleonic tactical generalship since Napoleon himself.” The discussions between the two Confederate generals on the subject of Napoleon must have been scintillating, but, alas, we have no record of them.⁹

In summary, Napoleon’s shadow was a long one, touching many, but it was notably cast upon an America by the name of Robert Edward Lee. But how so? Bonaparte himself offered a succinct explanation of his success, as noted earlier “exercised in conformity with principles.” In this essay the effort will be to identify such key principles, and evaluate the extent to which Lee would attempt to follow them. If Gettysburg for the Gray Fox was intended to be Napoleonic in scope and success, how did the student seek to model himself upon the master? Nowhere to my knowledge did Lee explain in any detail his reliance upon the lessons taught by Bonaparte. He will not note how in doing something as a commander he was thereby following in the footsteps of the French general. But having immersed himself in a study of Napoleon, it is inevitable that he would seek to replicate elements that earlier had proven so effective.

The Person of the Commanding General

Although a commander is by definition immediately related to thousands of men in his army, he is first of all an individual. No person is a carbon copy of one who has preceded him, but a person may well seek to model himself on him who with great success has gone before. How might R.E. Lee have looked to Napoleon Bonaparte as an example for personal qualities he would endeavor to manifest in his own life as he too leads a massive army?

Demonstrate Character

Bonaparte distilled the core of what makes a commander truly great by declaring, “the most essential quality for a general is firmness of character.” Such a sterling attribute encompasses integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, reliability, and morality—things not often ascribed as particularly important for warriors. He was not inspired in this by piety. Napoleon was rather prompted by the writings of Rousseau, the philosopher and ethicist who contributed much to the molding of the young Corsican in becoming a constructive and responsible leader, and though a warrior, even humanitarian. Jomini, pondering Napoleon, cited the “moral qualities... the greatness of character of the leaders” as making the difference in war. Men are not prone to follow into harm’s way a commander whose character is doubtful.¹⁰

R.E. Lee had grown up in an aristocratic Virginia culture where character was deemed paramount (admittedly, with a notable blindside regarding slavery) and Christian values exalted. Lee was seen by those who knew him as the epitome of high character. A staff officer who observed him closely and for prolonged occasions noted that “General Lee was naturally of a positive temperament, and of strong passions [holding] these in complete subjection to his will and conscience.” Whether Lee had appreciated this in his study of Napoleon is unclear, but he would have read of the respect his marshals and men had not simply for his competence and charisma, but also his character.

Learn from the great Captains of War

Napoleon taught his subordinates that “knowledge of the higher parts of war is acquired only through the study of the history of wars and battle of the Great Captains.” These become the effective teachers and mentors of those who would lead well in battle. Specifically, he referenced Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Gustav Adolphus, and Frederick as those from whom he had learned. Not only read them, but “meditate” on their campaigns, that their thinking might become your thinking.¹¹

Lee was likewise not only a student of history, but a disciple of those who had charted history by their prowess on the field of battle. In a 1865 letter written to George W. Pepper, he singled out Hannibal as outstanding in ancient times and, though he surely had an admiration for George Washington and Winfield Scott, cited Napoleon as the greatest in modern times. (Several years later his stated pantheon of model captains of war included Caesar, Alexander, and Wellington, as well as Napoleon.)¹²

Meet the Needs of the Soldiers

A commanding general has enormous authority to get what he wants from his army and from all those in the vicinity of that army. This awareness has led many military leaders to take advantage

for their own prestige, comfort, and affluence. In his later years Napoleon himself succumbed to this temptation, but in instructing subordinate commanders made the point, “Take good care of the soldier and look after him in detail.” He urged his commanders to identify with their men, to “bivouac with their troops.”¹³

Few commanders have done so well in this regard as Marse Robert, whose attention to the needs of the common soldier in his army prompted many to revere him. This attitude did not initially arise in his command of the Army of Northern Virginia, but was already manifest earlier in his military career. In a letter written on February 28, 1855, Lee highlighted how important it be for “attention night and day on the part of the officer so necessary. His eye & thoughts must continually be on his men. Their wants anticipated & their comforts provided...” During the war he made a point of bivouacking with his troops (though on occasion staying in a house when not feeling well). Such identification with his men and compassion for them is evident in wartime letters to his wife, where he emphasized the importance of getting socks for his soldiers.¹⁴

Build Morale

The intangible dynamic of an army that is challenging to create, difficult to measure, crucial for success... is high morale. The attitude of a commander does make a difference. Napoleon attributed his success on the battlefield to “a love of country, a spirit of enthusiasm, and a sense of national honor” held dearly by his men. He looked for occasions to boost it, and nothing prompts it more than success on the battlefield. Yet it is not simply victory, but victory for a cause. Jomini, interpreting Napoleon, explained that morale, “more than anything else... makes victories and their results decisive.” Carl von Clausewitz cited the “enthusiasm, fanatical zeal, faith” of the soldiers under Bonaparte for their nation as critical to his successes.¹⁵

Lee took pride in the growing morale of his army. Certainly, there had been disappointments, but in January of 1863 he gushed to Secretary of War James Sedden that “the spirit of our army is unabated.” He repeatedly took opportunity to explain to his soldiers the important task to which they were commissioned, and the success they were achieving. After Chancellorsville, the commanding general celebrated how in “attacking largely superior numbers in strongly entrenched positions their heroic courage overcame every obstacle of nature and art and achieved a triumph most honorable to our arms.” He boosted the spirit of his men.¹⁶

Instill Discipline by Example

Bonaparte well understood that by discipline an army not only marches and works, but “has its being.” Without it, an army becomes a mob uncontained and uncontrollable. Victory comes from every man knowing his place, upholding his tasking, and persevering through the horror of battle. “Napoleon opposed corporal punishments as degrading. Soldiers, he believed, should be inspired, not driven to fight and his officers were not only expected to know their men but to lead by example.”¹⁷

Both as Superintendent at West Point and later as President of Washington College, Lee’s standard of discipline became legendary. As a commanding general, Lee had a particular challenge: he was leading what was essentially a volunteer army raised from a democracy (although conscription had begun). Emperors can do and have done what Americans would not tolerate in their leaders. Lee could only impose so much upon his men, but understood the value

of modeling discipline for them. He created high expectations for his lieutenants, and they sought not to let him down and further to inspire the same in their subordinates. “I cannot trust a man to control others who cannot control himself.” Lee was renowned for earlier as a cadet having demonstrated self-control by not accumulating demerits.¹⁸

Organize Wisely



Antoine-Henri, Baron Jomini, the Swiss officer who admired and analyzed Napoleon's campaigns.

In his Article XLIII, Jomini dealt in detail with the attention Napoleon gave to organizing his army, but one core principle was spelled out by Clausewitz in his study of Napoleon, that such force “should never be divided into less than three... parts.” At one point Bonaparte explained the value of “three large corps [each] commanded by a lieutenant general.” He adopted a system of such corps, each numbering some 25,000 to 30,000, individually capable of moving on its own within a day’s march of another, and of fixing an enemy into position. Historian Andrew Roberts commented on how he was “generally content to leave logistics and battlefield tactics to [corps commanders], so long as they delivered what he required.”¹⁹

It is doubtful that Lee read Clausewitz’s assessment of Napoleon, but he may have gained the same insight in his own study. “If an Army is formed into two principal Corps,” explained the Prussian strategist, the chief commander can become neutralized. “Every one who has military experience will understand this without any further elucidation.” Having three or more corps allows

the commanding general more “mobility,” and it also keeps the stature of the various corps commanders as clearly subordinate. Whether this was a factor in Lee’s urging to Jefferson Davis that he expand army organization from two corps to three is unclear, but Lee did express in May 1863 that he could thereby become more effective in command, and the allowance was made for the campaign that would lead to Gettysburg.²⁰

Napoleon’s aptitude for organization cannot be minimized. F.M. Kircheisen concluded that his military triumphs were due in large part “to his amazing talent for organization.” Lee sought to follow suit with his own army, explaining prior to the campaign that “our army would be invincible if it could be properly organized and officered.” For his venture north of the Mason-Dixon line, Lee did in fact reorganize the structure of his infantry and artillery. The issues he encountered in doing so, however, had to do with the burgeoning concerns for the rights of States.²¹

Affirm the Prowess of Your Soldiers

Napoleon Bonaparte loved and affirmed his soldiers, and they in turn returned the respect. He boasted of them and flattered them. “Soldiers! You are the finest warriors in the world.” When there were shortcomings, as a general he dealt with them out of the public eye (though later in

his role as emperor he did become more critically outspoken of the perceived failures of key officers). His men went the extra mile for him because they discerned not only his prowess in battle, but his respect for what they accomplished. The “love and confidence between soldier and general” was pronounced.²²

Lee was likewise glowing in affirming his troops. After Chancellorsville, he declared that their conduct “cannot be too highly praised.” His men gloried in the knowledge of his respect for them. In pressing his troops toward Pennsylvania, he was exuberant in how they had conducted themselves. “No troops could have displayed greater fortitude or better performed the arduous marches of the past ten days... in keeping with their character as soldiers, and entitles them to approbation and praise.”²³

It ought to be added that where subordinates stumbled, both commanders made assessments and adjustments, though typically without projecting public blame. Both seemed to sense that accusations once initiated tended to multiply, and therefore sought to maintain a positive atmosphere among those exercising command. Subordinate commanders for both Bonaparte and Lee seem for the most part to have relished the opportunity to serve under their leadership and their respective staffs revered them.²⁴

Remain Cool and Brave

Many commanders in the heat of battle seem prone to lose their composure. The heralded Corsican declared that “the foremost quality of a commander is to keep a cool head.” Lieutenants and staff find they can maintain steadiness when they have someone to look up to who remains unruffled even in dire circumstances. Historian J.T. Headley wrote in awe of Napoleon, “He was brave as courage itself, and never scrupled to expose his life when necessary to success.”²⁵

Longstreet marveled at the “matchless equipoise that usually characterized” Lee, though puzzled at why things were different at Gettysburg. In another article, I explained the medical issues that likely were impacting him there, including dullness of vision. But even with that diminishment, Lee showed perseverance and courage taking himself to exposure of personal danger. And he praised subordinates who likewise displayed bravery, as in the case of James Johnston Pettigrew in the Gettysburg campaign.²⁶

Dress Simply

Although on grand occasions for assertion of political power Napoleon Bonaparte could and did don the attire of an emperor, his dress in leading his men into battle was startlingly simple. Vivant Dinon marveled at his uniform, “the simplicity he displays and marks him.” Captain Blaze noted his unadorned hat and coat that “distinguished him amid the crowd of... generals with embroidery on every seam.” Pretense was something he not only did not need, but which he despised, with a personal lack of adornment apart from official occasions.²⁷

During the Civil War, it was not uncommon for generals to have impressive uniforms specially tailored for themselves to set them apart from subordinates. Lee, though commanding general of the greatest of Confederate armies, became renowned for wearing the uniform of but a colonel, without wreaths or further adornment. Arthur Fremantle noted that Lee wore customarily a gray jacket that was “well-worn.” Although at Appomattox for the surrender he wore a new uniform

and took an ornate ceremonial sword and scabbard, it was not something he carried to impress his own men; indeed, he seems customarily not even to have carried a sword in the field.²⁸

The Commanding General in Campaign

A commanding general operates not only in relationship to people, but in the context of time and space. When he undertakes for himself and his army a mission that necessarily involves weeks and miles, we refer to the endeavor as a campaign. Napoleon had many such campaigns, mostly successful. In June of 1863 another army commander initiates such a campaign seeking to apply principles that earlier had proved valuable if not essential for victory.

Asserting Full Authority

“Nothing is so important in war,” declared Bonaparte, “as an undivided command.” It was simple for him to achieve once emperor commanding in the field, but even when in command of but one army among several he worked to assure that he was in complete command of that army to do as he saw fit, without being tied to annoying and limiting directives coming from Paris. “The government must place entire confidence in its general, allow him great latitude.” Napoleon accomplished more in his Italian campaign than was thought possible, due in part by his determination to do what he thought best on site in the field.²⁹

Lee was shrewd in this regard, continually expressing apparent deference to Richmond, while in effect assuring his independence in command. He expressed an obedient willingness to maintain a static defense of Richmond if that is what he was directed to do, though noting the catastrophe that would thus ensue. What President would then order him to do such a thing? And on June 25, with his campaign well underway, he alerted the War Department, “I have not sufficient troops to maintain my communications, and therefore have to abandon them.” In other words, he was politely declaring superiors not to bother telling him how to conduct the pending battle.³⁰

Obtain Good Maps

“It is very important,” counseled Bonaparte, “to have good maps.” He well understood that in marching and maneuvering elements of his army into battle and during battle, he had to have a mastery of the ground. Since he could not be at all crucial places at any given time, he had to rely upon cartography to extend his vision well beyond the horizons. “Maps were his invariable companions in a campaign.”³¹

Recall that Lee had maps of Napoleonic campaigns and battles displayed while he was Superintendent at the U.S. Military Academy. He well understood that comprehension of what has happened and what might happen depended upon such things. And so it was that Jedidiah Hotchkiss, noted in his diary, received on February 28, 1863, “secret orders... to prepare a map of the Valley of Virginia extended to Harrisburg, Pa, and then on to Philadelphia.” Going into the campaign north of the Potomac Lee would actually have a better map for operations than would his opposing general commanding the Army of the Potomac.³²

Use the Utmost Secrecy in Preparations

Napoleon was so effective in large part because he repeatedly surprised his opponents, catching them off guard. It was not that he acted impulsively; far from it. Few commanders in history took

more effort in planning. But he would insist of his staff, “make all your preparations in the most profound secrecy.”³³

Curiously, Lee used the same expression in directing Hotchkiss and others in anticipation of what would become known as the Gettysburg campaign. “The preparation to be kept a profound secret.” Lee was aware of the risk he was taking in moving his army northward. Even at the War Department in Richmond, there was notable puzzlement as to what he was doing, though “something” was certainly up as his “advance” in Culpepper County was noted, subsequently to be “marching on” and “busy in the saddle.” His plans were “wrapped in profound mystery” except to his President and Secretary of War. “What had hitherto been only a matter of conjecture,” that Lee was headed into Pennsylvania, was received with glee on June 20. One of Lee’s division commanders wrote his wife on June 28, 1863, “Gen. Lee intimates to no one what he is up to.”³⁴

Seize the Initiative

“March boldly,” declared Napoleon, for “by this means [one] disconcerts the enemy.” His prompt movements, the “rapidity” of his military forces in advancing, had disconcerted his opponents like nothing they had known before.³⁵

This principle was a core of Lee’s thinking in mid-1863. “As far as I can judge,” he told his Secretary of War, “there is nothing to be gained by this army remaining quietly on the defensive.” He wrote in his July 31 summary of the campaign that his intention was that the “enemy’s plan of campaign for the summer would be broken up,” and indeed it was. Professor Michael Jacobs of Pennsylvania College wrote an early history assessing Lee’s hopes “to find us as incoherent as a rope of sand, and utterly unable to resist his progress as he swept over the land.”³⁶

Move Promptly

"A rapid march augments the morale of an army, and increases its means of victory," declared Bonaparte. "Press on!" One of his officers commented, "No man ever knew how to make an army march better." This, of course, requires some specific decisions. For example, Napoleon wrote that "tents are unfavorable... [except as] necessary for superior officers." Carrying the extra weight of tents may be comforting on rainy nights, but it slows down and may exhaust an army.³⁷

Lee, though not matching the expediency of Jackson’s renowned foot cavalry, sought to move his army promptly into Pennsylvania, and, like Napoleon, did not burden them with carrying tents. The march was a challenge, since he expected his men to forage *en route*. Lee, however, apparently did not expect the Army of the Potomac to move with rapidity, as it had been sluggish earlier in the war, and this apparently threw off his calculations as to when combat would occur.

Use War to Nourish War

Logistics, as any student of war soon learns, is the underlying basis for success in battle. Supporting the advance of armies can be overwhelming, for an army can often exceed the size of a city, yet is depleting its resources faster. As Napoleon pushed his forces deeper into enemy territory, his capacity to support them via a line of operations diminished the farther they

advanced. Understandably, he counseled that “the country must supply you with provisions... everything necessary for your army.” Food, materiel, horses, medicines, and such must be procured by advancing into enemy territory.³⁸

Lee well understood this principle and sought to execute it in his Gettysburg campaign. On June 22, he messaged General Ewell that “it will depend upon the quality of supplies obtained in that country whether the rest of the army can follow.” Foraging in the campaign became as much an aspect of mission for the army as was fighting to be.³⁹

Prevent Pillaging

Foraging can, if not well managed, become destructive plundering. “Pillaging destroys everything, warned Bonaparte, “even the army that practices it.” The discipline of a military force then disintegrates, making it less and less likely that the ultimate mission can be accomplished. On this point Napoleon was emphatic. “Repress the horrible pillaging in which scoundrels... have engaged.” What may appear to bring momentary benefit to the soldiers ultimately can bring down an army.⁴⁰

In the Gettysburg Campaign General Lee could not have been more stern in upholding that standard. He told Brigadier General John Imboden to “repress all marauding.” He directed Major General J.E.B. Stuart, “I can have nothing seized by the men.” These pointed orders to cavalry commanders are a reminder that those forces, often distanced from the main body of troops, have opportunity to pillage beyond the awareness of the commanding general. But Lee was forceful in making the point to all his men in orders issued on June 28. “...no greater disgrace could befall the army, and through it our whole people, than the perpetuation of the barbarous outrages upon the unarmed and defenseless... the wanton destruction of private property.”⁴¹

Protect Your Line of Operations, Disrupt the Enemy’s

An army on the move becomes vulnerable when it becomes isolated. The line of operations acts somewhat like an umbilical cord to assure the continued health of that army. In 19th Century warfare, communications was largely by courier, and that traffic needed relative safety not only to assure that the message would get through, but also that it did not fall into the hands of the enemy. Resupply was usually critical, as an army often needed more ammunition, but also basic subsistence. And should reinforcement become necessary, their route must be unimpeded. Napoleon was typically involved in an offensive strategy, dictating that his army be moving forward. Thus, his succinct counsel in such matters was to “preserve your line of operations with care.” And have “only one line of operations.”⁴²

When R.E. Lee took the calculated risk of thrusting his army into enemy territory, preserving his line of operations became a great priority. As noted earlier, communications could not be assured. But he used two brigades of cavalry, those of Brigadier Generals Beverly Robertson and William E. “Grumble” Jones to protect his line of operations through the great valley of the Shenandoah. And he was also using that line to herd livestock back to Virginia. In pondering where best to concentrate his army for battle, east or west of the Blue Ridge, he wrote in his July 31, 1863 report of the pending threat of the Army of the Potomac to cut that crucial line, “thus

menaced, it was resolved to prevent his further progress in that direction by concentrating our army on the east side of the mountain.”⁴³

Lee also gave JEB Stuart directions for “doing them [the enemy] all the damage you can” if he might “pass around their army.” By doing so, Rebel cavalry would be crossing the line of operations of the Army of the Potomac, bringing confusion and destruction into the rear of that force. It is not exclusively the action on the front lines that determines whether an army can be victorious.⁴⁴

Concentrate Promptly

An army on the march cannot remain concentrated, but must be when the time comes for battle. Concentrating too early limits options and depletes resources; doing so belatedly risks being defeated in detail. Timing is of the essence here. By using intelligence of enemy forces, a timely convergence can be achieved. “Genius in the art of war consists in knowing when to scatter your forces and when to unite them.” Napoleon further explained, “the evening before a fight... I tried to converge all our forces on the point I wanted to attack.”⁴⁵

Lee sought to do likewise. “Our whole force was directed to concentrate at Gettysburg,” he wrote to Davis immediately after the battle. His repeated caution not to start a “general engagement” until his forces were up echoes this theme. How effectively he accomplished the concentration is certainly up for debate, but that he sought to do so promptly cannot be doubted.⁴⁶

The Commanding General on the Field of Battle

Here we come to the heart of the matter. Everything discussed so far is but prelude to battle. The true measure of a commanding general can only be measured on the actual field of combat.

Master the Coup d’oeuil

An army general must first assess and appreciate the conditions under which he will be fighting. The French word summarizing this task and talent is “coup d’oeuil,” a stroke of the eye. Bonaparte summarized it as “the ability to take in a military situation at a glance.” Mahan referenced it as “the whole field of view taken in by one eagle’s glance.” The ground itself must be understood, its critical features. In modern military doctrine aspects of coup d’oeuil include such things as key terrain, fields of fire, cover and concealment, obstacles, and avenues of approach. Moreover, Napoleon was thereby referencing how and where enemy forces are deployed, to discern their strengths and vulnerabilities in order to plan your own grand tactics.⁴⁷

Lee at Gettysburg sought to do what Napoleon had done so many times. “Every effort was made to ascertain the numbers and position of the enemy, and find the most favorable point of attack.” He was hindered at Gettysburg by his own dull eyesight and the relatively small headquarters staff available to assist in assessments. The sheer scope of the Gettysburg battlefield made this a challenge from any one or two points of observation, whether the college cupola or Seminary Ridge. Lee notably had to reply upon the reconnaissance of Captain Samuel Johnston to appreciate the tactical situation on the Union left. Yet Lee demonstrated repeatedly his capacity to grasp the broad implications posed on a field a battle, something where most generals stumbled.⁴⁸

Take Personal Risk As Needed to Reconnoiter

“Today the commander-in-chief,” acknowledged Napoleon, “is forced every day to face the guns, often within range...” Part of this was to obtain the coup d’oeuil, referenced infra, but it was also to impress upon his marshals to do the same, thus demonstrating bravery and thereby inspiring the troops. Soldiers, he well knew, always perform better in combat when they observe their commander among them or in advance of them, diligently doing his work.⁴⁹

With the development of rifled weapons with their longer ranges, this risk was heightened by the time of the American Civil War. In later battles, Lee became renowned for his willingness to put his life at risk, spurring his men to do likewise. But one incident at Gettysburg, when Lee was attempting a personal reconnaissance prior to Pickett’s Charge, is startling in this regard. “[We were] occupying the extreme front picket line,” explained a young officer in Barksdale’s Brigade, “when Gen. Lee... walking past us, stopping now and then to take observations... [He] halted a few feet from us, knowing the imminent danger he was in,” but continued studying the enemy line as if he were a farmer carefully examining his fields.⁵⁰

Avoid Councils of War

A council of war is the occasion when a commanding general assembles all his subordinate commanders together to discuss strategy and grand tactics in seeking an agreement as to what best be done. Napoleon was wise enough to realize that the perceptions and insights of others can truly be valuable, but wary of what might happen if it occurs in an assemblage of generals (or marshals). “Never hold a council of war,” he warned his army commanders, “but listen to the views of each in private.” Otherwise, the authority of the commanding general is diluted.⁵¹

Meade in the Gettysburg Campaign is noted for his calling such councils (even with his eight corps), although he balked at calling them such. But Lee never did so. He had but four subordinate commanders-- Longstreet, Ewell, Hill, and Stuart-- yet only twice during the battle met together with even two of them.

Calculate the Risk

As an officer rises in grade, the complexity of command he faces expands enormously. However, he necessarily relies upon the sagacity of his superior commander in the decisions needed to be made on the field of battle. But the commanding general has the critical grand calculations to be made. “Great Captains,” explained Bonaparte, “knew how to master chance.”⁵²

It is so often said that Lee took quite a chance in undertaking an offensive campaign, that he did so in planning the attacks of July 2, and that he certainly did so in conceiving of what we know as Pickett’s Charge. He said he “considered the problem in every possible phase” in how to conduct the campaign. He had earlier in his military career been described as “audacious,” but he was not one to toss the dice. Every step he took was calculated, weighing the risk against likely benefits. Many commanders in the American Civil War seem to have become paralyzed in making decisions, but not Lee. In the postwar period he told William Allan that “everything was risky in our war” that he “knew oftentimes that he was playing a very bold game.” That was never more so than at Gettysburg, but he carefully calculated what would be the best course of action, and subsequently told his president that there was no better option under the circumstances.⁵³

Avoid Flank Marches Once Engaged

Napoleon was a master at positioning his army for battle, pressing the marches to make sure each element was where it needed to be for combat. But once engaged, it became important not to expose his forces unnecessarily. “Do not make flank marches in front of an army that is in position.” A flank march, though sometimes confused with a turning movement, moves a line of battle, directing that every man turn left or right, proceeding laterally in front of an enemy position, thereby becoming vulnerable to being attacked in the process. Moreover, if an effort is made to turn or outflank a wing of the enemy, it must be done without “separating the army,” thus creating an “interval where the enemy may penetrate.”⁵⁴

Early in the morning of July 3, James Longstreet intended (indeed, had ordered) a flank movement to the right that could encompass the Union position. “I tried to anticipate him by saying: ‘General, I have had my scouts out all night, and I find that you still have an excellent opportunity to move around to the right of Meade’s army and manoeuvre him into attacking us’.” Lee stopped that. Not only would it have stretched his entire line to become thin or detached, not only would it diminish any possibility of effectively striking Cemetery Hill, but at what risk? Longstreet’s line, easily observed in the process, could have been struck while being out of position, or creating the interval in the Rebel line about which Bonaparte warned.⁵⁵

Discern the Decisive Point of the Battleground

In summarizing how Bonaparte moved to the fight, Jomini wrote how he would “judge soundly of the important point of the field of battle... and direct his attention on that point.” In commanding in combat, he appreciated what portion of the ground, the *point décisif*, would be decisive for victory, and sought to marshal his forces to take it, discerning how the enemy might be weak in holding it. He was not indiscriminate in attacking wherever, but always with a goal in mind.⁵⁶

Longstreet did not concur in Lee’s strategy at Gettysburg, but was soldier enough to recognize there could be but one general in command. Lee could not have been more emphatic where he wanted the attack to go, the ground that had to be taken to secure the victory. “He replied, pointing with his fist at Cemetery Hill: ‘The enemy is there and I am going to strike him’.” Once that was settled, it became a matter of preparing to do so. “General Lee rode with me twice over the lines to see that everything was arranged... the point of attack carefully designated.”⁵⁷

Mass Forces against that Decisive Point

Although Jomini wrote at length about so many important factors in Bonaparte’s success, he made it clear that the core of victory consisted in successfully “maneuvering in such a manner as to engage this mass of the forces with fractions only of the hostile army.” It was a maxim he repeated and rephrased lest it be ignored. “By tactical maneuvers, the mass of one’s forces upon the decisive point of the field of battle...” Again, “in managing so that those masses be not merely present upon the decisive point, but that they be put in action there with energy and concert, in a manner to produce a simultaneous affair.” In his framing of the Napoleonic offensive, Clausewitz wrote “choose only one point for the great shock, and give the blow against that point the greater strength.”⁵⁸

Lee craftily at Gettysburg sought to confuse Meade through concealment, distraction, and staged attacks, so that he might gain mass against a weakened Union position. An observer from Prussia, Captain Justus Scheibert, marveled how Lee at Gettysburg massed to assail what he knew to be the decisive point held by the Federals. Colonel E. P. Alexander reported that “I had heard it said that morning that General Lee had ordered ‘every brigade in the army to charge Cemetery Hill...’” Other elevations on the field were subordinate. Little Round Top hardly entered into Lee’s stream of consciousness, Culp’s Hill did so only as a step against Cemetery Hill, and the Emmitsburg Road ridge likewise as “desired ground” to do so. Converging fire of artillery from all three corps, followed by infantry advances, also from all three corps, were expected to make victory possible.⁵⁹

Contemplate the Oblique Attack

“Frederick’s success,” explained Napoleon, lay “in a novel order that he invented called the *oblique order*.” He himself understood the typical futility of the parallel order of attack, a frontal assault, “never to attack in front a position which admits of being turned.” Yet he also well knew that in making an attack of “the oblique order... [it] must be concealed” so as to achieve surprise. As Jomini had taught from his study of Bonaparte, “the parallel order is worst of all,” but “the oblique order is best for an inferior force attacking a superior...” Yet an attack from two directions “will render the victory more certain.”⁶⁰

At Gettysburg, Union Brigadier General Henry Hunt appreciated Lee’s intent on July 2 to “‘roll up’ our lines to Cemetery Hill... an ‘oblique order of battle,’ in which the attacking line formed obliquely to its opponent, constantly breaking the end of his enemy’s line.” That general plan was, by Lee’s explanation, unchanged the next day. Historian Edwin Coddington wrote that Lee on July 3 was “confident of the soundness of his plan for an oblique attack,” once he had achieved “the seizure of good artillery positions at the Peach Orchard...” Although Pickett’s Charge morphed into a frontal surge against Cemetery Ridge, it was not designed as such. Pickett’s men were to hide behind the ridge, then advance and wheel left to strike the Union infantry from the oblique. As that attack was striking, two other divisions were intended to advance *en echelon*, straight on, thus with an assault coming from two directions, a *coup de main* followed by a *coup de grace*.⁶¹

Conceal Your Plan of Battle

It is rudimentary, but Napoleon made a point of emphasizing that “in war the first principle of the commander is to conceal what he is doing.” Surprise was a key element in his many successes.⁶²

Initially the two armies at Gettysburg had collided in what would be a meeting engagement, a surprise to Lee. When he himself took charge of grand tactics on the field, concealment of planned offensives was an expressed concern. Longstreet explained that “General Lee ordered... the troops of the First Corps... by a route concealed from view of the enemy.” In order to initiate an oblique attack with hope of success, the Federals were not to be alerted to prepare for it. When Pickett was to stage for his attack July 3, “orders were given to Major-General Pickett to form his line under the best cover he could get...” Efforts to provide concealment did prove to be problematic (the countermarch and the suffering from Federal overshots the next day), but hope of success depended upon the attacking forces remaining hidden until the charges began.

Maneuver against the Enemy's Flank and Rear

A hallmark of Napoleonic battle was his counsel to “manoeuvre sur les derrières,” to maneuver upon the enemy’s flank and rear, to threaten it from unexpected directions. A 19th Century army in battle established a front, the direction it faced in line of battle, and from which it was prepared to engage the enemy. Bonaparte would successfully distract the main position of the opposing army, while suddenly alarming and defeating exposed elements in detail.⁶³

Weigley described this same tactic as “the hallmark of Lee’s generalship, like Napoleon.” Using Captain Samuel Johnston’s intelligence from early July 2, he hoped to do so. And the general plan of attack was “unchanged” the next day. For years I had been puzzled in the explanations of Brigadier General William Pendleton and Colonel A.L. Long, key staff officers at ANV headquarters, that Lee’s intention on July 3 was to strike a “flank” of the enemy line. What Lee discerned in his personal reconnaissance very early that morning, was that collapse of the Union position the previous evening had created an exposed flank. That was where Stannard’s Vermont Brigade had inched forward to deal with a knoll, but with no infantry upon their left. Meanwhile, Lee had tasked JEB Stuart in “attacking the rear of the Federal right flank,” to “threaten the enemy’s rear.” In each strike Lee hoped to create panic among defending Union forces, facilitating a rout.⁶⁴

Use Artillery in a *feu d’enfer*

“Great battles are won with artillery.” Bonaparte had begun his military career as an artilleryist, thereby gaining a sense of the true power of the long arm of war. His innovation of the grand battery to provide massive concentrated firepower became the means to master a battlefield. “Fire is everything,” he proclaimed in recognition of the power of artillery.

Lee had always been vulnerable to Union artillery that excelled in various ways. But at Gettysburg he found an advantage by having more room to set up guns, and the possibility with his external lines of bringing converging fire against the Army of the Potomac. Heavy cannon fire had been used successfully against the Peach Orchard on July 2 which, with subsequent infantry assaults, enabled that high ground to be available for his artillery the next day. Colonel E.P. Alexander described his tasking against the enemy, to create “the most effective cannonade possible... to try & cripple him—to tear him limbless.” A.L. Long described the intent that there be “the concentrated fire of all the Confederate artillery on Cemetery Hill.” Scheibert observed how Lee massed “some 100 pieces to bombard Cemetery Hill in preparation for storming.” The cannonade resulting, which actually involved nearly 150 guns, was, according to Brigadier General James Kemper, like “Milton’s description of the war of artillery between the contending host of Heaven.”⁶⁵

Initiate a Powerful, Audacious Strike

The *coup de main* was the crowning blow brought by Napoleon’s army, a crushing and sudden assault. “The strength of an army,” he declared, “is the product of multiplying the mass by the velocity.” Military historian William E. Cairns expressed awe about it, that “no one excelled him in the audacity of his conceptions or the rapidity with which he carried them into execution.” The massive stroke against the enemy position must be done, said Bonaparte, “with energy and severity.”⁶⁶

Colonel Joseph Ives had in June, 1862, declared that “Lee is audacity personified.” And that was before the Gray Fox demonstrated it in command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Pickett’s Charge, supported by three other divisions, was to accomplish what the French had witnessed repeatedly under the leadership of their Corsican commander. Colonel Edward Porter Alexander gushed at the audacity Lee demonstrated on the field of battle: “I think military critics will rank Gen. Lee as decidedly the most audacious commander who has lived since Napoleon, & I am not at all sure that even Napoleon in his whole career will be held to have overmatched some of the deeds of audacity to which Gen. Lee committed himself...” Although Lee was repeatedly limited in manpower, materiel, and weaponry, he was never in his time matched in audacity.⁶⁷

Assure that Attacks are Concentrated

Offensive tactics demand close coordination. Bonaparte once chided a lieutenant who proposed a neat and evenly balanced deployment, querying whether his intent was instead to collect tariffs. Instead, he instructed, “attacks must not be disseminated, but concentrated.” As hereinbefore noted, massing forces is essential. But, moreover, the assaults then undertaken must be concentrated against a vulnerable sector of the enemy position.⁶⁸

Lee was not only offensive, but aggressive in those grand tactics at Gettysburg. In both artillery and infantry attacks, he sought to be concentrated toward a point of attack. “By direction of the commanding general,” explained Brigadier General William Pendleton, “the artillery along our entire line was to be prepared for... a concentrated and destructive fire, consequent upon which a general advance was to be made.” Granted, execution of this did not meet expectations of the commanding general for a “concert of action,” but it is his frame of mind we are here considering.⁶⁹

Maintain a Relentless Assault

In most of his battles, Napoleon took the offensive, never letting up. “Once you have undertaken the offensive, it should be maintained to the last extremity.” Fight with “energy and severity.” Defenders are often shaken from being assaulted, and Napoleon sought always to push that into a rout with his men confident from having previously been successful in accomplishing that. Hesitation can lose a victory, but “vigor” in hard fighting assures one, and therein lay the fruits of success.⁷⁰

Some who have studied the Battle of Gettysburg ponder why Lee did not hold back on Day Three. Longstreet later argued that Cemetery Hill might have been theirs for the taking, with a bloodied and unnerved Union army anticipating withdrawal. Although Lee had not initiated the attacks that began the battle, he felt his army had gained momentum hour by hour, day after day. He acknowledged he was “determined to continue the assault the next day,” despite qualms expressed by Longstreet. Indeed, that next day “a more extensive attack” was contemplated. This is one of the clearest Napoleonic dynamics of his battle plan

Use All Elements of Your Army

In 19th Century warfare, the three primary branches of the military were infantry, artillery, and cavalry. Some commanders excelled at the use of one, less so with the others. Jomini in his study of Bonaparte observed that “the proper combined use of the different arms... will ensure

victory.” That was evident in battle after battle. “Do not neglect a single [force]; a battalion sometimes decides the day.” ⁷¹

By the time of the American Civil War, cavalry did not have the weight it had demonstrated in Napoleonic warfare. In the latter conflict it was often more effective either dismounted or detached. Lee was somewhat hobbled going into Gettysburg without his three finest cavalry brigades and without his grand cavalier, Major General JEB Stuart, but had those assets available and sought to use them effectively on July 3. In contrast to the way Meade maintained reserves, Lee ordered the engagement of every infantry division, every artillery battalion, and every available cavalry unit. The weight was carried relatively equally by all; each of his nine infantry divisions suffering 30% or more casualties.

Be Purposeful Using Cavalry

How your cavalry would be utilized was also important to Bonaparte. Horsemen have the capacity for many varied missions. “Charges of cavalry should be made always, if possible, on the flanks of the enemy.” In this he became renowned. But cavalry had one further tasking under Bonaparte, “It is the business of the cavalry to follow up the victory.” ⁷²

The offensive employment of cavalry as part of a battle plan was less evident in the Civil War, partly because of development in the range of cannons against them. Lee more often used cavalry effectively in detached missions, but at Gettysburg resorted to Napoleonic principles for this branch. Colonel Thomas Munford, a commander under Stuart, described their intended role in the battle as moving “around the enemy’s right flank and attacking their trains & artillery in their rear.” Major Henry McClellan, a staff member of Stuart’s, summarized their mission as “to observe the enemy’s rear and attack it in case the Confederate assault on the Federal lines were successful.” These accounts do not make it clear whether simultaneous or sequential charges were to be made, but the role was an echo of what Napoleon had imagined. ⁷³

Seek to Annihilate the Enemy

Military historians A.Z. Manfred and L.A. Zak explained that “Napoleon I established the utter defeat of enemy personnel in one all-out battle as the primary goal of combat action.” He was not satisfied with simply winning the contest. The fact that he did so repeatedly in decisive battle made him even more feared. ⁷⁴

Lee’s aim, according to Weigley, was the battle of annihilation, that the Federal army be destroyed. Major General Isaac Trimble, a supernumerary for Lee when the campaign was underway, declared that Lee had told him “I shall throw an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it... create a panic and virtually destroy the [Union] army.” Major General William Dorsey Pender, while *en route* to Gettysburg, wrote to his wife that he had learned of Lee’s intent to the upcoming battle not only to “whip” but to “crush” the opposing army. In postwar conversations reported by William Allan at Washington College, Lee reportedly explained he felt “that the Federal army would have been ruined” at Gettysburg had the necessary coordination of action been achieved. ⁷⁵

Demonstrate Fortitude in case of Defeat and Retreat

Although Napoleon Bonaparte had a number of amazing victories, he did on occasion suffer defeat. The collapse of his army in the Russian campaign is notorious. It was easy to move on in light of victory, but great leadership sometimes has to deal with defeat. As he has often been quoted, “Courage isn’t in having the strength to go on— it is going on when you don’t have the strength.”

Brigadier General John Imboden described the utter exhaustion felt by Lee at the close of battle, more than simply the disappointment at defeat. As darkness fell on July 3, Lee knew he remained the commanding general of his army, and that they needed him more than ever. In this essay it is not possible to review the efforts he made to get his army safely back to Virginia, but a summary is well stated by historian Kent Masterson Brown. “Gettysburg cannot be viewed as... a turning point of the eastern theater of war after Lee’s remarkable retreat.”⁷⁶

Care for the Wounded

The work is certainly not done when the last weapon is fired. Leadership must continue, and focus given to one particular thing. Baron Bausset, observing Napoleon after battle, declared “What he was chiefly anxious about was the care of the wounded.” He wrote hundreds of letters expressing particular care for such casualties. “Repeated acts of kindness to poor wounded soldiers,” observed one historian, “was one of the cords of iron which bound them to him.”⁷⁷

Lee was respected by his men not only for his prowess in battle, but for his deep and genuine, continuing concern for their welfare. And that was never more so than in the aftermath of battle. In counseling Imboden on what he must do, Lee stressed that “as many of our poor wounded as possible must be taken home.”

Where Lee Fell Short

Lee had his Gettysburg defeat, but Napoleon of course had his Waterloo and in a sense, they are different, as the latter was a grand, climatic defeat and the former a sore disappointment amidst a continuing war. Yet the only combat in which Lee likely imagined achieving a decisive Napoleonic-like victory “by which an enemy is broken and utterly dispersed,” as Mahan depicted it, would have been the battle engulfing the village at Gettysburg. Lee did lose that one, and why? What were the missing elements?

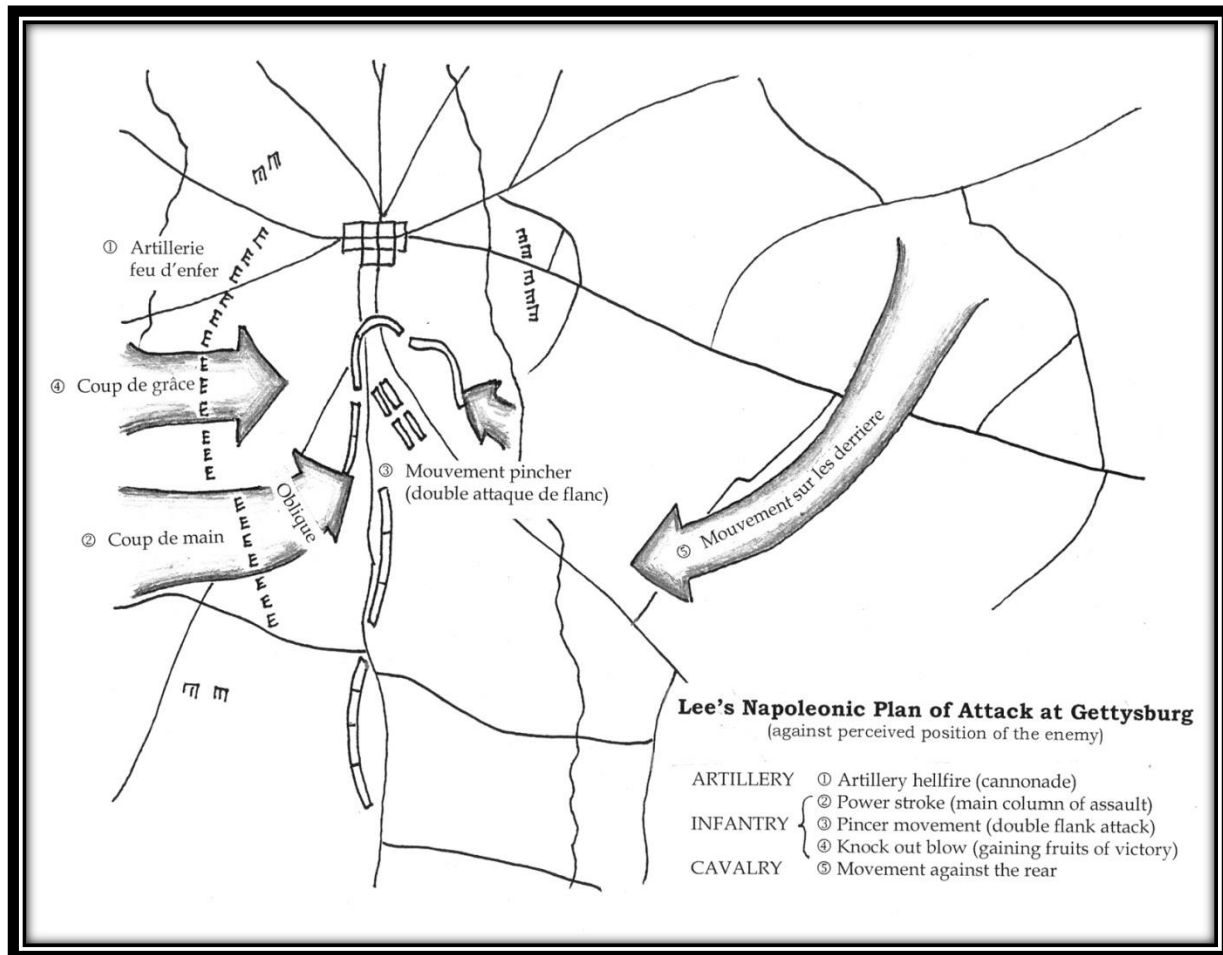
His Age

Bonaparte declared that “youth is almost indispensable in commanding an army.” When he captured world attention in 1796-97 for his amazing victories in the Italian campaign, he was but a young man still in his mid-20s! At Waterloo he was still a decade younger than Lee at Gettysburg. Beyond age 50, he opined that a man is no longer in his prime. Grant was astonished that Lee in his mid-50s could still command an army (although Scott had done so in Mexico). It is obviously unfair to make this a point of criticism of Lee, for he could do nothing about it. But his age might factor into why he could not accomplish what he read Napoleon had done.⁷⁸

His Health

A related matter is the health of the commanding general. Napoleon was succinct about this. “In war good health is indispensable.” I have elsewhere spelled out at length the evidence that Lee was suffering physically during the Gettysburg Campaign, but his own explanation to President Jefferson Davis a month after the battle is revealing enough:

“I sensibly feel the growing failure of my bodily strength... I am becoming more and more incapable of exertion, and thus making those personal examinations and giving the personal supervision to the operations in the field... I am so dull that in making use of the eyes of others I am frequently misled.”⁷⁹



Map by Chuck Teague, 2017

Caution in Detaching Columns

In commanding huge armies, it sometime becomes necessary to detach elements. Napoleon did so in approach to Waterloo, a decision with dire consequences (perhaps he should have complied more certainly with his own counsel). “To act upon lines far removed from each other, and without communications, is to commit a fault... They should move toward a point fixed upon their future juncture.” Lee allowed the core of his cavalry assets to become separated from the army when he gave discretion to JEB Stuart, “You will however be able to judge whether you

can pass around their army without hindrance, doing them all the damage you can, & cross the river east of the mountains.” The intended future juncture was not accomplished, although blame should be shared. Major Charles Marshall viewed Stuart’s failure to rejoin the army in a timely fashion as a primary cause of the defeat, but Lee’s allowance for discretion by Stuart—shall I say leeway?—was a part of the equation.⁸⁰

The Advance Guard

Few in history are so renowned for their marches as Napoleon, and each such movement presents risks. “When the army is in column of march,” he instructed, “there must be advance guards and flank guards to observe the enemy’s movements... [and] allow the main body of the army to deploy...” This role was customarily undertaken by cavalry, due to their mobility to accomplish it.⁸¹

Lee had seven brigades of cavalry available, though their respective experience, capabilities, and leadership varied. Two guarded his rear, including mountain passes into the great valley, a third guarded his left flank on the march, and a fourth led the way toward Harrisburg. The best three brigades, personally led by Stuart, were to move to cover the most exposed direction, toward the enemy army. They did not, with the consequence that a collision occurred when Rebel forces advanced on Gettysburg without having an advanced guard. Lee should have been giving clearer oversight to his new corps commander, Ambrose Powell Hill. As it was, an artillery battalion and a small brigade consisting of depleted regiments led the way without cavalry, part of a newly-formed makeshift division advancing with two inexperienced brigadiers in the lead. It was the formula for a most inauspicious start to what Lee hoped to be a decisive battle.

Clarity and Simplicity in Orders

“Give your orders in such a way that they cannot be disobeyed,” counseled Bonaparte. But in the Gettysburg Campaign, Lee repeatedly issued directives that led to confusion. Historians continue to debate over the discretion he allotted Stuart in the advance. Ewell reacted with frustration to his instruction to “proceed to Cashtown or Gettysburg, as circumstances may dictate,” exclaiming “indefinite phraseology! ... Can’t anyone at headquarters write a decent order?” Later direction to “take that hill of practicable, but don’t start a general engagement” has left many students of the battle scratching their heads. [The instruction may well be due to Lee’s recollection of Napoleon’s directive “the first principle of war is that one ought not to deliver battle except with all the troops which one can unite on the field of operations.”] And key participants had different interpretations of what Lee meant in his successive instructions to Longstreet. Ambiguity seemed to hover over the headquarters of the Army of Northern Virginia.⁸²

Assure a Timely Juncture of Forces

“A principle which admits of no exception,” declared Bonaparte, “that all junctions of army corps should be made in the rear and far from the enemy.” That, of course, did not occur for Lee, whose forces in combat consisted of but one corps, till another arrived, till the third arrived. “It would be better to make three or four marches more and to unite one’s columns in the rear and far from the enemy than to operate their reunion in his presence.” An explanation of why this

did not happen at Gettysburg with the Army of Northern Virginia would take more verbiage than is here allotted, but it resulted in a somewhat disjointed engagement.⁸³

Maneuver to Benefit from Interior Lines

Napoleon was not the first to recognize the advantage of interior lines, whereby communication, resupply, and movement of troops was simplified. Lee seemed to appreciate the principle in instructing Ewell to shift back to the right, although capitulating to arguments that the 2nd Corps should stay. Granted, he maintained the possibility of converging fire. But in doing so Lee gave to Meade the classic instance of how holding interior lines gains advantage in winning in battle.⁸⁴

Promptness in Pursuing the Fight

Napoleon hammered his maxims. “In war every delay is fatal.” The rapidity with which he moved in battle has awed military scholars, as well as his quickness in battle. “There is a moment in combat when the slightest maneuver is decisive and gains superiority.” He was prompt in combat, but hesitation characterized much of Confederate initiative at Gettysburg. Lee held back Anderson’s Division on the evening of July 1, yet hoped to take Cemetery Hill. Longstreet was twice to lead attacks as early in the morning as possible, yet not getting underway till afternoon. Alexander said he had “leisure” (!) on the morning of July 3 in deploying artillery; Pickett’s Division meanwhile was left waiting for hours in the hot sun. Despite the boldness in which attacks were finally made, there was a surprising lethargy in getting them underway.⁸⁵

Manage the Chaos of Battle

Jomini acknowledged the “disorder which always prevails to a greater or less extent” in battle. Clausewitz called this reality “*Wechselwirkung*,” the impact that violence has in battle in impacting and changing an army, confusing and causing paralysis to a commander. Napoleon thought quickly and reacted quickly to developments on the field of battle; those who observed him marveled at how active and engaged he was in the heat of battle. It is a rare talent “indispensable” said Jomini, for one “amidst the noise and confusion of battle, to keep a hundred thousand men co-operating toward attainment of a single object,” but essential to master the field of combat.⁸⁶

Sir Arthur Fremantle, the British Army observer, commented with surprise on how passive Lee seemed to be during the Battle of Gettysburg, a loss of equipoise described by Longstreet. Whether this was due to health issues, addressed infra, is but a matter of speculation. And whether his apparent passivity contributed to defeat is even more so. Communication during the battle was haphazard, though Napoleon suffered from the same problem.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Lee appreciated lessons learned from his predecessor in combat, but it would be inaccurate to describe him as a rigid adherent of Napoleonic maxims. Indeed, mental flexibility is always essential in applying such principles to fit the operational situation at hand. Any much of what he did was unlikely conscious and intentional adherence, but the product of lessons learned in various ways.

The study here undertaken of comparing two great captains of war, how the one may have modeled himself on the other, may be an exercise in overanalysis. Lee was intelligent warrior and may simply have recognized principles and practices to which Bonaparte had earlier become aware. In some matters, it may be a matter of coincidence that there are parallels between them. Lee never took the time to address it.⁸⁸

Yet it is clear that Lee truly hoped in this battle to have the decisive battle that Napoleon had demonstrated was possible, and strove as he could to achieve it. Mahan, describing Bonaparte's formula for decisive victory, helps us to understand what Lee sought to do:

“[A]n enemy is broken and utterly dispersed by one and the same blow. No futilities of preparation; no uncertain feeling about in search of the key-point; no hesitancy upon the decisive moment; the whole field of view taken in by one eagle glance; what could not be seen divined by an unerring military instinct; clouds of light troops thrown forward to bewilder his foe; a crashing fire of cannon in mass opened upon him; the rush of the impetuous column into the gap made by the artillery; the overwhelming charge of the resistless cuirassier; followed by the lancer and hussar to sweep up the broken dispersed bands...”⁸⁹

Yet, in the final analysis, Larry H. Addington capsulized Lee's frustrations pointedly: “The greatest of the Confederate commanders had failed to find that Napoleonic victory which he had hoped would end the war and bring about Southern independence.” Surely this was a huge disappointment. But as another student of Bonaparte famously noted, “In war more than anywhere else,⁹⁰ things do not turn out as we expect.” That was so true for R.E. Lee at Gettysburg.

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Footnotes

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² Frederic Louis Huidekoper, *Military Studies* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson-Kimberly, 1904), p. 102 (hereafter cited as Huidekoper); Cyril Falls, *The Art of War from the Age of Napoleon to the Present Day*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 19, 30 (hereafter cited as Cyril Falls, *The Art of War*); Peter Paret, “Napoleon and the Revolution of War,” Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 123 (hereafter cited as Paret).

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- ³ Paret, p. 177; Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advance-Guard, Out-Post and Detachment Service of Troops* (New York: John Wiley, rev. 1861), pp. 30, 33 (hereafter cited as Mahan).
- ⁴ Jay Luvas, *Napoleon on the Art of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 29 (hereafter cited as Luvas); Allen Nevins, *The War for the Union*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 224; Mahan, p. 33.
- ⁵ Weigley, p. 414; James L. Morrison, Jr., *The Best School in the World* (Kent, Ohio: Kent University Press, 1986), p. 97; Theodore Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2002), p. 118.
- ⁶ R.E. Lee letter to Jerome Napoleon, September 19, 1850 at <http://leefamilyarchive.org/9-family-papers/208-robert-e-lee-to-jerome-napoleon-bonaparte-1850-september-19>. Hereafter cited as Lee letter to Jerome Napoleon.
- ⁷ Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee*, (New York: Charles Scribner, 1936), Vol. 1, pp. 353-355 (hereafter cited as Freeman).
- ⁸ Paret, p. 177.
- ⁹ Jackson's copy has been displayed at the Museum of the Confederacy; Weigley, p. 424.
- ¹⁰ Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1862), p. 344 (hereafter cited as Jomini); Luvas, p. 66.
- ¹¹ Luvas, pp. 24, 41; Huidekoper, p. 23.
- ¹² Lee letter cited in *The Recollections and Letters of Robert E. Lee*, by his son, (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1904), p. 316.
- ¹³ Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2014), pp. 80, 358 (hereafter cited as Roberts); Luvas, pp. 69-70.
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- ⁴¹ R.E. Lee letter to John Imboden, June 20, 1863, Dowdey & Manarin, pp. 521-522; R.E. Lee letter to JEB Stuart, June 22, 1863, Ibid., pp. 523-24; R.E. Lee, letter to JEB Stuart, June 23, 1863, Ibid., p. 526; R.E. Lee, letter to Jefferson Davis, June 23, 1863, Ibid., pp. 527-28; R.E. Lee, General Order No. 73, June 28, 1863 in Clifford Dowdey, editor, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), pages 533-534 (hereafter cited as Dowdey).
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- ⁴⁶ R.E. Lee letter to Jefferson Davis, July 4, 1863, Dowdey & Manarin, pp. 538-539.
- ⁴⁷ Luvas, p. 65; Jomini, pp. 90, 185, 337; Mahan, p. 30.
- ⁴⁸ Lee letter to Gen. Samuel Cooper, July 31, 1863, *OR*, Vol. 27, Part II, p. 308
- ⁴⁹ Roberts, p. 50.
- ⁵⁰ W. Gart Johnson, 18th MS, "Reminiscences of Lee and Gettysburg," *Confederate Veteran Magazine*, (1893) Volume 1, p. 246.
- ⁵¹ Maxims, p. 65; Luvas, p. 91.
- ⁵² Luvas p. 30; Cyril Falls, *The Art of War*, p. 15; Clausewitz, p. 722.
- ⁵³ Harry Heth letter to Rev. J. William Jones, June 1877, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Volume 4, p. 154, hereafter cited as *SHSP*; William Allan, "Memoranda of Conversations with General Robert E. Lee," February 19, 1870, Gary Gallagher, ed., *Lee the Soldier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 17; William Allan, *The Army of Northern Virginia in 1862*, p. 200, n. 1; R.E. Lee letter to Jefferson Davis, July 31, 1863, Dowdey & Manarin, pp. 564-65.
- ⁵⁴ Luvas, pp. 37, 40; Huidekoper, p.46
- ⁵⁵ Jackson at Chancellorsville did not conduct a flank march, but did maneuver away from the field in order to execute a flank attack--the same word "flank" is used for two quite different tactics.
- ⁵⁶ Jomini, pp. 86-87, 186.
- ⁵⁷ James Longstreet letter to A.B. Longstreet, *SHSP*, Volume 5, pp. 54-55.

⁵⁸ Roberts pp. 54, 85; Jomini, p. 70; Clausewitz, pp. 155, 167, 169, 728; John Shy, "Jomini," Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 152.

⁵⁹ Captain Justus Scheibert, *A Prussian Observes the American Civil War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 82 (hereafter cited as Scheibert); Edward Porter Alexander letter to Rev. Jones, March 17, 1877, *SHSP* (1877), Vol. 4, p. 104.

⁶⁰ Maxims, p. 16 & 30; Luvas, pp. 39-40, 57; Huidekoper, p. 112; Jomini, pp. 188, 201-02, 323.

⁶¹ Cyril Falls, *The Art of War*, p. 75. Falls argues that Lee, a good tactician in contrast to most Civil War generals, understood that frontal attacks were essentially futile; Edwin Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), pp. 374, 377, 380, 405. Coddington describes Lee's plan for attacking obliquely; Henry Hunt, "The Second Day at Gettysburg," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, (New York: The Century Co., 1887-1888, reprinted 1991), Volume 3, p. 300.

⁶² Luvas, pp. 69, 89, 92; Jomini, p. 200; Clausewitz, pp. 365, 730.

⁶³ Maxims, p. 51.

⁶⁴ Major Henry B. McClellan, *The Life and Campaigns of Major-General JEB Stuart* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1886); p. 341; Major W.W. Blackford, *War Years with Jeb Stuart* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 232; Colonel Thomas T. Munford, 2nd Virginia Cavalry account, July 1915, Anne Bachman Hyde Papers, Library, University of North Carolina, copy in Library, Gettysburg NMP; John Esten Cooke, *Wearing the Gray* (New York: E.B. Treat & Co., 1867), p. 257; Louis Philippe d'Orleans, *The Civil War in America* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1886), p. 223. The author believes that Lee's tactical plan was not, as some have speculated, somehow reaching and driving up the eastern slope of Cemetery Ridge.

⁶⁵ E.P. Alexander, quoted in Gary Gallagher, ed., *Fighting for the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 245-46, (hereafter cited as Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*); A.L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (London: Sampson, Low Marston, Searle, and Rivinton, 1886), p. 288; Scheibert, p. 82; James L. Kemper letter to Edward P. Alexander, September 30, 1868, Dearborn Collection of Civil War Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁶⁶ Jomini, p. 216; William E. Cairns, *Napoleon's Military Maxims*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), Chapter 37; Luvas, pp. 30, 33, 40; Roberts, p. 84; Clausewitz, p. 182.

⁶⁷ Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, pp. 91-92.

⁶⁸ Roberts, p. 54; Clausewitz, p. 743.

⁶⁹ Brigadier General William Pendleton official report of the Gettysburg Campaign, September 12, 1863, *OR*, Vol. 27, Part II, pp. 346-351.

⁷⁰ Maxims, p. 6; Luvas, pp. 69, 128; Roberts, p. 99.

⁷¹ Maxims, pp. 39 and 47; Luvas, p. 43; Jomini, p. 203; Napoleon, *Précis des guerres de Frédéric II*, 17th Observation, Correspondence, tome 32, 210.

⁷² Maxims, p. 51.

⁷³ Thomas Munford account, July 1915, GNMP; Noah Andre Trudeau, *Gettysburg: A Testing in Courage* (New York: Harpers, 2002) p. 147; Captain James G. Harbaugh, *Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association* (1903).

⁷⁴ Manfred & Zak; Jomini, pp. 89-90, 188; Clausewitz, pp. 229, 747

⁷⁵ Weigley, pp. 424, 427; Gabor Boritt, ed., *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997); Emory Thomas, "Eggs, Aldie, Shepherdstown, and J.E.B. Stuart," (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), quoting Trible (c. 1883), p. 110; William Hassler, *The General to His Lady: The Civil War Letters of William Dorsey Pender to Fanny Pender*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Iniversity of North Carolina Press, 2012) pp. 245, 251 ; William Allan letter to Rev. J.W. Jones, April 26, 1877, *SHSP*, Volume 4, p. 79.

⁷⁶ John D. Imboden, "Lee at Gettysburg," *Galaxy Magazine* (April 1871), p. 509; Steve French, *Imboden's Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign* (Berkeley Springs, West Virginia: Morgan, 2010), p. 83; Kent Masterson Brown, *Retreat from Gettysburg* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 390.

⁷⁷ Roberts, pp. 434, 609; Headley, p. 38.

⁷⁸ Roberts, p. 87; Luvas, p. 2

⁷⁹ R.E. Lee letter to Jefferson Davis, August 8, 1863, Dowdey & Manarn, pp. 589-90.

⁸⁰ Maxims, p. 6; Luvas, p. 129.

⁸¹ Maxims, p. 32; Luvas, p. 12; Falls, pp. 13, 32

⁸² Maxims, p. 74; Luvas, pp. 70, 79; Jomini, p. 196; Huidekoper, p. 116; Cadmus Wilcox, "General C.M. Wilcox on the Battle of Gettysburg", September 1878, *SHSP*, Volume 6, pp. 117-121.

⁸³ Napoleon, *Précis des événements des six derniers mois de 1799*, 5th Observation, Correspondence, tome 30, 398.

⁸⁴ Albert Sidney Britt, *The Wars of Napoleon* (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1972), p. 15.

⁸⁵ Roberts, p. 357; Luvas, pp. 9, 67; Jomini, p. 101; Clausewitz, p. 690.

⁸⁶ Jomini, pp. 184, 344.

⁸⁷ Rothenberg, p. 163.

⁸⁸ The subject of this essay is also addressed by John Morgan Dederer, "The Origins of Robert E. Lee's Bold Generalship: A Reinterpretation", *Military Affairs*, # 49, Lexington, Virginia (July 1, 1985), p. 117.

⁸⁹ Mahan, pp. 185-186.

⁹⁰ Addington, p. 87; Clausewitz, p. 149.