Epilogue: The Armies at Gettysburg

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The summer of 1863 witnessed one of the most intense and risky campaigns of the American Civil War when General Robert E. Lee removed the primary force in northern Virginia that kept the Union Army from the defenses of the capital of the Confederacy and marched his Army of Northern Virginia north and across the Potomac River. Described as a raid by some historians or a well calculated strategy by others, it was a bold move to take the war out of Virginia, relieve pressure in other theaters of the war, and place additional political pressure for the Lincoln Administration to bow to calls to end the bloodletting, the Union was not worth the price. In pursuit of and shadowing Lee's forces was the Army of the Potomac, one of the largest armies of the Union and the most politically driven. Two years of war, changes in commanders and administration had likewise re-arranged the structure of the Army and how it functioned. It was not until 1863 when it, like it's counterpart in gray, had fully adjusted the army's support system and military organization, which neither sparked its ability to move and fight nor diminished that ability. Leadership under General Joseph Hooker was wanton of action; mere words did not win a battle and without personal confidence in himself, the prospect for success in any military campaign was pre-ordained to fail. Likewise, the political implications of poor army management weighed heavily on the Lincoln administration and its war aims.

There was little doubt that summer that taking the war north of the mighty Potomac was the most effective course of action for Lee and his confident, determined army. Lee exhibited no lack of self-confidence, no moments of reflection to make one believe he did not have full confidence in his abilities or the quality and spirit of his soldiers, from the top generals to the lowest privates. "The demands of a major campaign with its calculated risks and daring strokes acted as a tonic to him," wrote Edwin Coddington in his masterful *The Gettysburg Campaign, A Study in Command*. "With affairs in full swing he appeared at his best- vigorous, alert, and in good spirits." [1] And it had to be a relief to the general to be away from a dreary, stagnant camp and desk full of correspondence between he and Jefferson Davis and other officials at the Confederate war department. Certainly, it was Lee's close ties to the Davis administration that gave the general an advantage in planning not only for campaigns in Virginia but to debate the merits of the Confederate war plan.

And why wouldn't he take advantage of his position to offer sorely needed advice? Lee began the war as a confidant and advisor to Davis, a role that continued during his command of an active army and a victorious one at that. Effects of victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville were euphoric, especially after the latter battle, a psychological "confidence in the military prowess of the Army of Northern Virginia" that soared in the officer's ranks,

reflected in their letters written home that summer. That spirit of confidence, the win while facing greater odds, was the foundation of the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia and its ability to perform under the most trying conditions, which began with the campaign as the infantry marched into the Shenandoah Valley, teams of horses strained to pull the heavy artillery pieces while mounted troopers exhausted their mounts on narrow roads and trails to screen the main column. Of all branches, it was the footsore infantryman who endured the harshest of conditions. Over the first few days, the soldiers enjoyed pleasant mid-June weather and cool nights, followed by several days of unendurable heat and humidity. "A great many have broken down & a good number have been sun stroke," one Mississippian recorded in his diary. "The heat has been very oppressive (having) come about 18 miles." The next day was no better with temperatures into the 90's, "very hot & little air stirring," followed by two days of continual rain interspersed by periods of soaking downpours, hail, and a chilling wind. [2] Fires could not be kept lit and rations were short, only the entreaties of the officers kept the men going; that and the determination to not be left behind. And for most, reaching the Potomac was inspiring enough- the war was now going to be fought on northern soil. And the army marched on, across the Potomac River and into northern territory where Lee gambled this summer would be a turning point in Confederate fortunes.

It was not the same Army of Northern Virginia that crossed the Potomac that summer, not the same as it had been two months before the Battle of Chancellorsville, or the same that had previously invaded Maryland nine months before. The death of General "Stonewall" Jackson gave Lee the opportunity to reorganize his army from two to three corps with adjustments made to artillery battalion organizations. Simply put, it took one heck of a general to manage a corps of thirty thousand and few could do it efficiently. A much smaller corps removed part of the responsibility of management of so many units under one roof, and certainly gave Lee more freedom to direct his army in covering areas that did over reach the corps commander's communication needs. Likewise, organization of the cavalry into one division under a single commander gave Lee the advantage of a swift mounted force that could accomplish more as a single combat group than it could scattered around the army to support the infantry units. Lee's staff also consolidated the organization of army supply trains, which made for a more efficient logistical system. The Army of the Potomac certainly outmatched the Confederate army numerically and technically in artillery, cavalry, equipment, and logistical support. Despite these advantages, none proved adequate to defeat Lee's army when concentrated on a battlefield; not at Second Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, or Chancellorsville. So, why did the Army of Northern Virginia lose the Battle of Gettysburg?

Perhaps it was because the Army of the Potomac was not same army as it had been in previous campaigns. George G. Meade's appointment to command of the Army of the Potomac on June 28 was the epilogue to a period of rebuilding, a process begun nearly six months to the day of Meade's appointment. When General Joseph Hooker assumed command in late January 1863, "The army was not in good condition," General Daniel Butterfield testified. "Desertions were

very large, and an unpleasant feeling existed through(out) the army- a lack of confidence in its ability to accomplish anything." [3] The high number of desertions indicated not only a lack of morale in the army- Butterfield reported an estimated 80,000 men absent from the Army at the time of Hooker's appointment-but also inadequate supplies, rations, disorganization of the army's cavalry, and the bulky organization of Grand Divisions too large to efficiently control. Hooker's organizational skills were set to work and after a period of three weeks, morale among the rank and file improved as did discipline and purpose. The Commissary was required to issue vegetables and fresh bread to the troops in place of the strict salt pork and hardtack diet while measures were taken to improve the physical health of the troops, affected not only by poor diet but abuse from the elements and a passive negligence by medical staff. Supplies flowed into the Army via railroad and towed barges, a highly efficient system devised by General Herman Haupt and Colonel David McCollum, both of whom made the military railroad system a marvel to behold. The Army was rebuilt and reinforced, a massive force led by a fighting general.

Though the Army of the Potomac was rejuvenated by Hooker's orders, many of the details came from professionals like Daniel Butterfield, an innovator among regular army officers who was not afraid to buck the system. During the Army's reorganization period, it was Butterfield who proposed and issued the orders from Hooker and who came up with the idea of corps badges for the seven infantry corps, each a unique shape that would not only quickly identify the troops that bore the symbol on their caps, but also provide a symbol of esprit for the men in the ranks; a badge of distinction that only added to unit pride but also "discipline of the army". [4] If anything, it was discipline that Hooker saw lacking in the army under Burnside; that and corruption at levels of commissary and supply right down to a small group of field officers who took consistent advantage of regimental funds for their own benefits. Hooker took measures to correct this and in the process, his appointed inspectors made life miserable for the inept but also gave men in the ranks a reason to feel appreciated again. Morale improved with discipline and adherence to military regulations.

Despite all of the positive gains initiated by Hooker, they were quickly forgotten in the aftermath of Chancellorsville in May 1863, and nothing could have saved the general from eventual removal from command. Before departing, Hooker was cordial and impressed upon his officers the need to continue doing their duty, "calling upon all to do everything in their power to assist General Meade.; assuring them that it would all be for the best, that the Army of the Potomac would have a successful campaign." Meade's appointment did not change the Army of the Potomac, but it did renew its purpose, secured in Meade's dictation of orders to move north from Frederick, Maryland, to screen and defend the capital from the Army of Northern Virginia.[5]

The armies that clashed at Gettysburg were old acquaintances but also newly energized and determined foes with experienced leaders. Lee and Meade had years of military experience in both garrison duties and mobile campaigns, Lee with the advantage of more years as an army commander. George Gordon Meade was new to the job and for the 47 year-old general who knew every decision he made would be scrutinized and evaluated, the pressure upon him was

immense. Yet, Meade had an advantage that Lee did not enjoy- an experienced staff of officers at headquarters who were professionals at getting jobs accomplished. Though Meade inherited the somewhat troublesome Butterfield from Hooker, he also had General Henry Hunt in charge of the army's artillery, General Seth Williams who pursued his duties as adjutant general, Captain Lemuel Norton, the chief Signal Officer, Gouverneur Warren, who's initiative saved the Union left on July 2, and many others who did their duty to provide Meade with the tools he needed to administer the army. Likewise, he had corps commanders he trusted, aggressive and level headed with the skills needed to place troops in the most threatened spot. There were others of course, from division commanders to colonels of regiments, who were beyond efficient and innovative, but the core of Meade's efficiency lay with the men around him in whom he trusted and would offer sage advice on how to counter Confederate strategy and execute his orders.

An army commander can only be effective on the battlefield when the personal staff of the commander knows the will and thought processes of their leader. If anything, Robert E. Lee had a superior staff, soldiers who knew their commander's habits by heart in comparison to that of General Meade who inherited officers in primary positions from General Hooker on June 28. Yet, Lee suffered from a vacancy of advice and leadership from these same officers on the battlefield. Few offered solutions to the problem of getting at the Army of the Potomac, too far set into the role clerical duties or traditional roles to perform otherwise. The commanders of all three corps fall into that category of less than stellar performance.

Lee consistently met with his corps commanders for information and opinion, though the burden of giving the final order remained squarely on his shoulders. This was by his choice and in his mind, defined his position as army commander. Should Lee have listened more closely to Longstreet who advised against the attack on July 2 and again on July 3? Should the general have been more forceful in the execution of orders by Ewell on July 1? Were other suggestions put forth by division commanders ignored by Lee, whose mind was set on the course of attack for July 2 and 3?

On the opposite spectrum, Meade chose to rely heavily on a core of trusted officers, men he knew through his years of experience, the same tired, dirty men crowded into a single room in his headquarters late on the evening of July 2, to provide information on not only the condition of their corps but also offer their opinions on a course of action. Despite what critics have written on Meade's generalship at Gettysburg, the "council of war" was the proper sounding board. It gave Meade critical information on the status of his army, the strengths and weaknesses of its position, and gave him a much needed boost of confidence that he had chosen the proper course for the coming day. And Meade listened; he listened carefully to the answers his generals provided.

"Questions Asked:
1. Under existing circumstances, is it advisable for the army to remain in its present position, or to retire to another nearer its base of supplies?

2. It being determined to remain in present position, shall the army attack or wait the attack of the enemy?
3. If we wait attack, how long?

GIBBON (Second Corps):
1. Correct position of the army, but would not retreat. 2.
In no condition to attack, in his opinion.
3.Until he moves; until the enemy moves.
WILLIAMS (Twelfth Corps):
1. Stay.
2. Wait attack.
3. One day.
BIRNEY (Third Corps): Same as General Williams.
SYKES (Fifth Corps): Same as General Williams.
NEWTON (First Corps):
1. Correct position of the army, but would not retreat.
2. By all means not attack.
3. If we wait, it will give them a chance to cut our line (of communication).
HOWARD (Eleventh Corps):
1. Remain.
2. Wait attack until 4 p.m. to-morrow.
3. If we don't attack, attack them.
HANCOCK:
1. Rectify position without moving so as to give up field.
2. Not attack unless our communications are cut.
3. Can't wait long; can't be idle.
SEDGWICK (Sixth Corps):
1. Remain, and wait attack at least one day.
SLOCUM: Stay and fight it out." [6]

Meade's willingness to put forth these questions and accept the opinions of his corps commanders was far different from his counterpart. He took their advice and was subsequently the victor at Gettysburg, though not without cost. The Army of the Potomac bled the following day and again during the pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia to the Potomac River. As Dr. Murray points out in her paper on the controversy of the pursuit, Meade's professionalism as an engineer and his concern for the physical and material condition of the army would portray him as overly cautious or timid in the pursuit. Yet was the basis of that caution his direct observation of the condition of the army and uncertainty of factual military intelligence about his opponent's forces?

Despite the defeat at Gettysburg, the Army of Northern Virginia was still a force to be reckoned with, as dangerous as a wounded animal. Meade knew this, more so than any of the generals ensconced in the offices of the War Department in Washington. Likewise, Lee still retained confidence in his army and the soldier who served it. "The privations and hardships of the march and camp were cheerfully encountered," Lee humbly reported, "and borne with a fortitude unsurpassed by our ancestors in their struggle for independence, while their courage in battle entitles them to rank with the soldiers of any army and of any time." [7] Napoleon's influence on Lee was profound. As Chuck Teague's examination concludes, the general learned military maxims from the greatest general of the nineteenth century but also developed a love and deep regard for the soldiers who served under him, a regard heartily returned by the men in the ranks with displays of undying loyalty.

Meade did not share the same sentiment toward his rank and file, but that was simply not his way. Nor was it way of the Army of the Potomac to adore its commander, not since the days of George McClellan. In the end, the recognizable contrast in the two commanders was how the army supported each and carried out their orders on the bloody ground of Gettysburg.

Footnotes

[1] Edwin Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop), p. 105, hereafter cited as Coddington.
[2] Coddington, p. 6; Robert A. Moore, *A Life for the Confederacy* (Jackson, TN: McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc., 1959), p. 151.
[3] Testimony of Major General Daniel Butterfield, March 28, 1864, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-Eighth Congress* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1865), p. 73, hereafter cited as Butterfield, *Conduct of the War.*
[4] Stephen Sears, *Chancellorsville* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), p. 72. For further discussion on changes initiated by Butterfield with Hooker's approval, refer to pp. 65-
[5] Butterfield, *Conduct of the War*, p. 82.
[6] *War of the Rebellion, The Official Records of the Union & Confederate Armies*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1889) Series 1, Vol. 27, Part 1, p. 73.
[7] Ibid., Series 1, Vol. 27, Part 2, pp. 324-325.