LEE AT GETTYSBURG: LEADERSHIP FAILURE OF THE CONSUMMATE WARRIOR

It is generally conceded that the Pennsylvania campaign and culminating battle at Gettysburg in July of 1863 was one of the most pivotal clashes of arms that occurred during the American Civil War. My purpose is to highlight the actions of Robert E. Lee as the Confederate commander, specifically the interplay of his personality and style of leadership and the impact it played in the defeat of this consummate warrior in his most ambitious endeavor.

The Confederacy in 1863 was hard pressed on all fronts. The confederate leadership saw the need for some kind of offensive-defensive stroke to relieve the pressure on the nation, in particular Vicksburg. Lee conceives of a campaign north with limited objectives: replenishment of his army (food), give battle on his terms, attempt to sway northern public opinion by transferring the war north of the Potomac. However his most valued commander is dead, a severe handicap in this campaign.

Lee is a study in contrasts. The considerate, self-effacing leader who abhorred personal quarrels, yet a warrior who could, without a word, instill a god-like fear in his subordinates. The noble christian gentleman who inspired universal respect and self confidence and yet as Commandnader of the Confederate Army never hesistated to take the most enormous gambles.

The most serious defects in his leadership seem to be his predilection for not interfering in the battle once it has started and curious reluctance to impose his will upon his subordinates on the battlefield. It is argued that the latter was a factor in
Ewell's failure to attack cemetery ridge thus losing the victory on the first day at Gettysburg. His issuance of vague and discretionary orders often leads to misinterpretation of his intent. In the case of J.E.B. Stuart, this would have disastrous consequences at Gettysburg.

Lee's audacity, his overwhelming aggressiveness and willingness to take enormous gambles in the face of the enemy, keeps him on the field at Gettysburg when withdrawal or maneuver were probably the more prudent courses of action. These facets of his leadership that produced such amazing results when Jackson was his chief lieutenant, ultimately prove to be his undoing.

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OUTLINE

THESIS STATEMENT

The actions of Lee as the Confederate Commander, specifically the interplay of his personality and style of leadership will be examined to determine the impact it played in the defeat of this consummate in his most ambitious endeavor.

I. The Confederacy and Lee in 1863.

A. Assaulted on all flanks.

1. Defeat of Vicksburg is imminent
2. Time is on the side of the North
3. The need for an offensive-defensive stroke
B. The Confederate Initiative.
   1. Various plans are raised
   2. Lee proposes his strategy
   3. The issue is one of subsistence for the Army
   4. Adopted by the Cabinet

C. Lee the man and military leader.
   1. The defects of his leadership
   2. A study in contrast
   3. His relationship with Jackson

II. The setting for Gettysburg.
   A. The tactical defensive?
   B. Vague and discretionary orders.
   C. Stuart's misinterpretation of his instructions.

III. The 1st Day at Gettysburg.

   A. Lee's original intent.
      1. No general engagement on 1st day
      2. His options
      3. He senses the chance for victory, the tiger comes out of the man.

   B. The Federals are routed.
      1. The opportunity to take Cemetery ridge
      2. Discretionary orders
      3. Lee fails to prompt Ewell to action
      4. The opportunity is lost

   C. Lee's options at the end of the first day.

   D. He orders an attack for the second.
IV. The 2d Day at Gettysburg.

A. Longstreet's reluctance to attack.
   1. Lee's intent for him to be ready on the morning of the 2d
   2. McLaw's account
   3. Lee issues formal order at 11:00

B. The attack is uncoordinated and fails.

C. Lee fails to impose his will a second time.

V. The 3d Day at Gettysburg.

A. Lee's options at the beginning of the day

B. The decision to attack.

VI. Conclusion

LEE AT GETTYSBURG:
LEADERSHIP FAILURE OF THE CONSUMMATE WARRIOR

It is generally conceded that the Pennsylvania Campaign and the culminating Battle of Gettysburg was one of the most pivotal clashes of arms that occurred during the American Civil War. An epic struggle that comprised a series of lost opportunities and disastrous miscalculations by the commanders of the Confederate Army, it signalled the end of offensive military strategy for the Confederate states.
Examining this campaign and its vast, climatic battle inevitably leads to the question that has been asked, analyzed, and answered by any number of authorities: How was it that the Confederate Army, brilliantly led by Robert E. Lee, victorious from 1st Manassas to Chancellorsville, supremely confident and better equipped that at any time during the war, failed at Gettysburg? To this end the actions of Lee as the Confederate Commander, specifically the interplay of his personality and style of leadership will be examined to determine the impact it played in the defeat of this consummate warrior in his most ambitious endeavor.

The Confederacy in 1863 was assaulted on all flanks. Despite the stunning successes of the Army of Northern Virginia, the South, out of necessity, was fighting a defensive war in order to either secure international recognition or win over Northern public opinion. The Confederacy was slowly but inexorably losing. Vicksburg was encircled, New Orleans had fallen and the Federal blockade was having a telling effect. The war was being fought on Confederate soil with the concomitant destruction of the economic infrastructure. Food, forage, and supplies to equip field armies was steadily decreasing. Time was on the side of the North.
When the confederate leaders met in May of 1863, they could see the emergency in the west presented by the encirclement of Vicksburg and knew that if it fell the Confederacy was well on its way to defeat.1 The South needed some kind-of offensive-defensive stroke to relieve the pressure from all sides. Various plans were developed for the relief of Vicksburg through the detachment of forces from Lee's Army which was currently facing Joe Hookers 90,000 across the Rappahannock.2 Lee was against this and later said:

It would be folly to have divided my army; the armies of the enemy were too far apart for me to attempt to fall upon them in detail. I considered the problem in every possible phase, and to my mind, it resolved itself into a choice of one of two things—either to retire to Richmond and stand a siege, which ultimately must have ended in surrender, or to invade Pennsylvania.

Much has been written about Lee's decision in this regard but


the overwhelming reason seems to have been subsistence. The
damaged southern economy was finding it increasingly difficult to
supply the large forces arrayed in the defence of Richmond. Lee,
in effect, could no longer feed and clothe his army.4 This poverty
in the resources of the Confederacy imposed strict limits upon
his choices of action.5 His objectives, therefore, were of
necessity short range: invade Pennsylvania and replenish his
army, give battle on his terms to Union forces when the opportunity
presented itself, and hopefully influence Northern sentiment with
a view towards ending the war by transferring "the devastation of
battle beyond the Potomac."6 The Confederate cabinet obviously
agreed, approving his plan unanimously save for one dissenting
vote.7

Who was the man entrusted by the Confederate leadership for
this daring stroke in an attempt to relieve the pressure on their
beleaguered nation? Supremely confident, charismatic, embodying
the conceptual ideal of his time, he was the knight errant immersed
in duty and self sacrifice, noble and beyond reproach.8 A
gentlemanly, unruffled, forgiving man who was notably tolerant of

4. IBID.

5. Sir Frederick Maurice, R.E. Lee: The Soldier (Boston and

the deficiencies of others, he detested personal quarrels and was adverse to rebuking subordinates unless the circumstances were most extraordinary. The army worshipped him. Always considerate, he preferred compromise to confrontation and would tactfully suggest to subordinates what their course of action should be or where their duty resided. This may have given rise to his curious reluctance in battle to "back his own judgement against his chief subordinates and enforce his will." Lee himself said:

My interference in battle would do more harm than good. .. I think and work with all my might and power to bring the troops to the right place at the right time: then I have done my duty. As soon as I order them into battle, I leave my duty in the hands of God.

This was a serious defect of his leadership and would have enormous impact at Gettysburg.

Despite his unassuming manner and seeming passivity towards relations with his subordinates, there was another almost fey aspect to the man as one biographer points out in the following passage:

"You wait and see," Major A. R. H. Ransom was told when he reported to Headquarters and an
assignment on Lee's staff. "You have known the General socially. You have now to make his acquaintance as your Commanding General." Soon, Ransom was assured, he would be terrified of Lee. Ransom laughed at the idea. But they were right. Soon he was scared of Lee. . .There was something about him of the tiger. . .it was not

9 Freeman, I, p. 12.
10 Maurice, p. 143.
11 IBID, p. 144

not safe to breathe normally about him.12

The devoted family man, conservative and self effacing, he was not given to displays of temper but always seemed to be coolly in control. He possessed a deep religious faith in his God that would sustain him through many trials. Lee believed that mountains could be moved by faith.13 Yet unlike a man so disposed, on the battle-field he was willing to take calculated but tremendous risks. Porter Alexander once wondered whether Lee, after his assumption to command of the army, had the "audacity" to take the necessary risks to combat McClellan's legions arrayed before Richmond in 1862. Voicing the concern to Colonel Joseph Ives, the latter responded:

"Alexander, if there is any man in either army head and shoulders above every other in audacity it is General Lee! His name might be audacity.
He will take more desperate chances and take them quicker than any other general in the country north or south, and you will live to see it."14

A study in contrast. The considerate, self effacing patriarch yet a warrior who could, without a word, instill a god-like fear in his subordinates. The noble christian gentlemen who inspired universal respect and confidence, and yet, as commander of the Confederate Army, never hesitating to take the most enormous risks. Such was the man chosen by the South to lead the major military effort in 1863, a man of whom it can truthfully be said no one really knew.

12 Smith, p. 180.
13 Maurice, pp. 2,3.
14 IBID p.129

As in most commanders, Lee's personality impacted the character of his leadership. With Jackson as his chief subordinate Lee's almost detached style of command worked extraordinarily well. A hint or a suggestion from his commander became a directive for Jackson. Working in total consonance, each knew the mind of the other. There would be no misunderstanding of the commanders intent here. The synergism between them was perfect. Indeed it had to be considering the enormous tactical gambles taken by Lee at 2nd
Manassas and Chancellorsville. The nature of this relationship was such that with the loss of Jackson, Lee's army would not be the precisely responsive body it once was. It is not clear if Lee realized this or if he did could not compensate for it. This is a key element when contemplating the miscalculations and mistakes made by himself and his commanders during the campaign and subsequent battle.

The first noteworthy instance to examine involves the assertion by his 1st Corps Commander, James Longstreet that Lee had committed himself to the tactical defensive during the northern invasion. Longstreet, a stubborn man and true believer in the tactical defense, obviously pressed his commander with his misgivings about the northern campaign. When he was unsuccessful in changing Lee's decision, he believed that he had at least secured a commitment from him to conduct a campaign of defense. He writes:

All that I could ask was that the policy of the campaign should be one of defensive tactics; that we should work to force the enemy to attack us...

To this he readily assented as an important and material adjunct to his plan.15

There is no evidence to suggest that Lee agreed to anything of the sort and in fact did not believe that "Longstreet ever made
a statement to that effect."16

What most likely occurred is that Lee, seeing the fervor with which Longstreet was pursuing his views, was loath to develop a personal issue over tactics with his chief corp commander on the eve of the campaign. Though it will never be known exactly what was said between the two, Lee was probably tactful, considerate and almost sympathetic to the views presented by Longstreet but fell well short of committing himself to what was proposed. Longstreet simply mistook tact for acquiescence. Lee's failure to be more assertive led to a misunderstanding of his commanders intent by Longstreet. This would have great ramifications on the 2nd Day at Gettysburg.

Another instance to examine is Lee's instructions to his cavalry chief J.E.B. Stuart for the march north. On June 22nd, 1863, Lee wrote to Stuart:

I judge the efforts of the enemy yesterday were to arrest our progress and ascertain our whereabouts. . .Do you know where he is and what he is doing? I feel he will steal a march on us and get across the Potomac before we are aware. If you find that he is moving northward ... you can move into Maryland and take position on General Ewell's right, place yourself in


communication with him, guard his flank, keep him informed of the enemy's movements and collect all the supplies you can use for your army. One column of General Ewells will probably move towards the Susquehanna by the Emmitsburg route, another by Chambersburg...

On 23 June he again wrote to Stuart:

...If General Hooker's army remains inactive... and should not appear to be moving northward, you had better withdraw this side of the mountain tomorrow night and move over to Fredericktown.
You will however be able to judge whether you can pass around their army without hindrance, doing them all the damage you can, and cross the river east of the mountains.
In either case, after crossing the river you must feed the right of Ewell's troops, collecting information, provisions, etc.
Give instructions to the commander of the brigades left behind, to watch the flank and rear of the army, and (in the event of the enemy leaving their front) retire from the mountains west of the Shenandoah...
Bringing everything clean along the valley, closing upon the rear of the army. As regards the movement of the two brigades of the enemy moving towards Warrenton, the commander of the brigade left in the mountains must do what he can to counteract them, but I think the sooner you cross into Maryland, after tomorrow, the better. 18

The fact that Lee communicated twice in two days with Stuart over his role in the campaign indicates his concern over the use of the cavalry as a screening force for his army. He obviously wanted to be sure that Stuart understood what it was he was
supposed to do.

Still there is much left open to interpretation in this order.


18  Freeman, p. 47.

Which side of the Union army would he or could he pass "without hinderance?"1 How far east of the mountains should he cross? How soon after the 24th should he be in Maryland? Is he to screen the flank of Ewell alone or the entire army? One look at a map and the route of Lee's march leaves no doubt that his intent was to have the cavalry screen the right flank of his entire army and provide intelligence on Union movements. However, his order does not specifically spell this out. Stuart the "noisy, irrepressible Chief of the cavalry corps" 19 whose well known reputation for independent enterprise and penchant for sweeping raids, 20 whose pride had just been stung and Brandy Station 21 was simply the wrong person to give such vague and discretionary orders to. For whatever reason, known ultimately only to Stuart, he misinterpreted his instructions, went off on a grand raid around the eastern flank of the Union army and did not seem to realize that his duty resided with the main body of his army until the 28th.22 The consequences of his actions and their impact on the outcome of the battle are
well documented.

Again the impact of Lee's personality and style of command are evident. In his letters of the 22nd and 23rd of June there is the suggestion and implication of what he wanted Stuart to do.

19 D. S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944) p.xxxii.


21 Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, p. 51.

22 Ibid, p. 65.

(screen the right flank of the army) but he does specifically order his impetuous cavalry commander to do it. Obviously Lee felt that he had been specific enough. But Stuart and Longstreet were not Jackson. They lacked not only his tactical skill but his ability to instantly discern Lee's intent. They were not in sympathy with the mind of their commander.

The effects of this interplay of Lee's personality and style of command at these critical junctures in the beginning of the campaign would be felt at Gettysburg. With Longstreet his concern and consideration for a chief subordinate and aversion to personal quarrels lead to a serious misunderstanding of the tactical nature of the campaign. With Stuart his detached and
unassuming style of command ultimately led to the issue of vague and discretionary orders which were grossly, perhaps willfully, misinterpreted with disastrous consequences. Some of this will surface again during the coming battle along with other factors; his overwhelming offensive combativeness once engaged, willingness to take the calculated gamble, and unbounded faith in the spirit of his army and the fighting qualities of his men.

When Heth's division of A. P. Hill's corps began its advance toward Gettysburg on July 1st, they were aware that Union forces were to their front and were under instructions not to bring on a general engagement.23 They began the advance as cautiously as circumstances would dictate in the absence of cavalry and after the initial clash halted, and awaited instructions.24 By all accounts Lee was disturbed about the clash but his agitation was probably a combination of anger at being surprised, lack of information on the size of the enemy to his front due to the absence of Stuart, and the scattered disposition of his own forces. When Lee arrived on the scene Heth asked for permission to renew the attack but was told "No, I am not prepared to bring on a general engagement today... Longstreet is not up.25 Later after the
arrival of Ewell's corps and the remainder of Hill's the tactical situation had changed. The Federals were hard pressed. Lee's idea about avoiding a general engagement was altered. Ewell and the remainder of Hill's corps were committed to the attack.26 The route of Federal forces in front of Gettysburg began.

At this point Lee could still have withdrawn. The Union forces were not concentrated, were at a tactical disadvantage and would not have effectively mounted a pursuit. Instead, the tiger came out of the man. He elected to attack as his army came upon the field despite his lack of knowledge of the size or proximity of the remainder of Union army. He writes:

> It had not been intended to deliver a general battle so far from our base unless attacked, but coming unexpectedly upon the whole Federal Army, to withdraw through the mountains with our extensive trains would have been difficult

24 Ibid, p. 159.

25 Hassler, p. 159.

26 Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, p. 87.

and dangerous. At the same time we were unable to await an attack, as the country was unfavorable for collecting supplies... A battle had, therefore, become in a measure unavoidable, and the success already gained gave hope of a favorable issue.27
He leaves out the fact that on July 1st the Federal Army was still concentrating and would not be up in full strength until the afternoon of the 2nd. Despite this circumspect report, Lee smelled blood on this day. He saw this chance for a tactical victory. The instinct of the warrior took over. Longstreet writes: "...
when the hunt was up his combativeness was overruling. "28

As the battle continued into the afternoon of the 1st, the Union forces present were driven in disorder through the town of Gettysburg and onto the heights of Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge. Two divisions of Ewells corps had reached the foot of these slopes and their division commanders, Early and Rodes, were beseeching Ewell to let them press the attack.29 At this point Col. W.H. Taylor, Lee's Adjutant-General, was sent to Ewell.

Taylor comments:

General Lee witnessed the flight of the Federals through Gettysburg and up the hills beyond. He then directed me to go to General Ewell and say to him... that it was only necessary to press those people in order to secure possession of the height and that if possible he wished him to do


this. General Ewell did not express any
objection or indicate the existence of any
impediment to the execution of the orders
conveyed to him, but left the impression
upon my mind that they would be executed.30

Ewell did not move. There is more than ample evidence to indicate that he could have.31 The position on these heights was not yet consolidated, the troops were temporarily demoralized and reinforcements could not arrive before the attack began.32

Though Lee must have realized the importance of this terrain he was not readily given to forcing his subordinates to adopt a specific course of action. Ewell was given discretionary orders to attack "if possible." He did not do so and the first opportunity for victory was lost.

Despite this turn of fortune Lee, at the end of the 1st day, was still master of the field. His options had not essentially changed. He could fall back along his route of march and withdraw. Though he considered this a move which involve great risks,33 in retrospect it does not appear to have been so. The Union forces, badly mauled on July 1st and with their army not fully concentrated, were unlikely to begin an offensive pursuit. He could move around the Union left flank and attempt to interpose himself between the Union Army and Washington. With the main
body of the enemy close and in the absence of cavalry this could have been disastrous. He could fight where he was even though time was his enemy as the Union Army gathered its forces. Perhaps he saw this as the moment where a decisive victory might raise the voices of those in the north who desired peace above all others. Perhaps his combativeness was just overwhelming. Whatever the reason, Lee, the confident aggressive warrior, leader of the finest the South could muster, decided to take the calculated gamble. He elected to fight.

Though he still did not know the strength of the forces before him, he obviously knew they were being steadily reinforced, for an attack was ordered for the next morning. James Longstreet was given the task of conducting the main assault on the left flank of the Union defenses on the 2nd of July. A logical choice since he was Lee's chief subordinate and his corps had not seen action on the 1st day. It was also a fateful one considering that he (Long-
street) felt that Lee had previously committed himself to the tactical defensive.

After the close of action on the 1st, Lee informed two of his corps commanders, Longstreet and Hill, that they would attack in the morning as early as possible. Lee did not set, as far as can be determined, a time for the attack or the composition of his forces. Saying this as he did to Longstreet and Hill leaves no doubt (at least in Lee's mind) that he expected both of them to be ready to attack in the morning.

34. Ibid, p. 110.

It will serve no purpose to discuss in detail the various interpretations of the events that led to the delay of Longstreet's attack on 2 July. From all sources there is not a shred of doubt that he dragged his feet as long as possible. If McLaw's account is correct, Lee was pointing out the position he wished Longstreet's Corp to occupy and objectives for the attack as early as 8 a.m. on the 2nd. No formal order was given. In Lee's mind and in keeping with his methods of command this was enough to prod a subordinate to action. Longstreet, not wanting to attack, was reluctant to move and did not do so until Lee issued a formal directive to him at 11 A. M. The subsequent attack by the reluctant commander was
conducted piecemeal, poorly coordinated and failed to turn the Federal left. For the second time in two days Lee had failed to enforce his will upon his subordinates.

The third day still found Lee the master of his own fate. Again it seems clear that his options had not changed. His choice again however was to attack. He felt that:

... with proper concert of action and with the increased support that the position on the right would enable the artillery to render to the assaulting force, we should ultimately succeed.36

It is difficult to understand how Lee could have thought that a mile long charge with only a portion of his forces over open ground against the center of the Union Army, now fully massed,

35 Luvaas, p. 53.
36 Cowell, p. 67.

would have succeeded. His army had been fighting continuously for two days. Many of his brigades were exhausted with several sustaining over 50% in casualties. Blood lust? Overpowering confidence? Boundless faith in the invincibility of his men? The refusal to believe that he could be denied victory? Perhaps the brief penetration of the Federal center the prior day invaded his counsel and gave rise to the belief that one concerted push would
be enough. Perhaps the ferocity of the consummate warrior after being so close to victory simply would not allow him to break it off.

There were dozens of reasons why the Pennsylvannia campaign and culminating battle at Gettysburg ended in failure for the Confederate army. Fault can be laid at a multitude of doorsteps for any number of reasons but Lee himself, as he readily admits, must shoulder much of the blame.

The fundamental faults of his personality as a commander betrayed him. His predilection for not interfering in the course of battle (bringing the troops to the right place at the right time and leaving the rest in the hands of God) would not work here. His issuance of discretionary orders for the most critical of missions and his curious reluctance or inability to enforce his will upon a subordinate at a critical time was to have a telling effect. But most of all those qualities which had previously produced such amazing results failed him. His audacity, his overruling aggressiveness and willingness to take the most enormous risks worked against him. The destiny of generals often rests on the turn of fortune's wheel.

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