EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Commander's Intent; A Study of Lee's intent at Gettysburg

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Thesis: Commander's intent was formally defined by the Marine Corps in FMFM-1 in 1987. Up until then, the manuals that existed were vague and often contradicted each other. It is now 1995 and it might be a good time to expound upon intent and rewrite FMFM-1.

Background: Commander's intent should be focused toward the enemy and answer the question: What do I want to do to the enemy? It should convey the commander's vision. Further, subordinates should understand the intent of the commander two levels up. FMFM-1's definition of commander's intent is a good starting point but certainly is not complete. This paper expands the definition of commander's intent and concludes with Lee's campaign at Gettysburg. Although the Marine Corps does not plan on fighting Gettysburg, studying Lee's campaign offers the military leader an outstanding lesson in understanding the importance of commander's intent.

Recommendations: Most officers and SNCO's, who are not recent graduates of the Marine Corps formal school system, probably do not completely understand commander's intent. Since FMFM-1 may be their only exposure to commander's intent, then FMFM-1 should be rewritten and thoroughly explain commander's intent.

How many times during the day does a subordinate not understand his superior's intentions, which in turn leads to missed opportunities? In the business world, such losses lead to millions of dollars, but in the military not understanding your commander's intent could cost the success of the mission or, even worse, the lives of your fellow Marines. Several years ago in 1987, the Marine Corps formally defined commander's intent in FMFM-1. The Army defines commanders Intent in FM 100-5.

The commander's intent is not a new concept, rather a new term, and may not be so
easy to grasp. Most officers, who are not recent graduates of TBS or other military schools, believed they understood what commander's intent was, but the manuals that existed were vague and often contradicted each other. FMFM-1 says we achieve harmonious initiative through the use of commander's intent. In its view a mission has two parts: the task to be accomplished and the reason or intent. The task describes the action to be taken while the intent describes the desired result of the action. While a situation may change, making the task obsolete, the intent is more permanent and continues to guide our actions. Understanding our commander's intent allows us to exercise initiative in harmony with the commander's desire in the face of changing battle conditions.

Commander's intent should be focused toward the enemy and answer the question: What do I want to do to the enemy? It should convey the commander's vision. Further, subordinates should understand the intent of the commander two levels up. FMFM-1's definition of commander's intent is a good starting point but certainly is not complete. Commander's intent is better defined in the Army's FM100-5. A commander must know the intention of the commander two levels above him, understand the concept of his immediate commander, and know the responsibilities of the units on his flanks. If an unanticipated situation arises, committed maneuver unit commanders should understand the purpose of the operation well enough to act decisively, confident that they are doing what their superior's commander would order done were he present.

Thus commander's intent is the guidance provided to subordinates that enables them to act in a changing environment without additional orders. Commander's intent stands alone -- should no other guidance be received, it serves as the cement that holds the
mission together. "Success of the mission depends on subordinate commanders understanding what the King wants." said Attila the Hun. Current doctrine states that commander's intent shall be depicted in a formal operations order in paragraph 3a(I), followed by the concept of operations in paragraph 3a(2). The higher unit commander's intent will be depicted in paragraph 1b. The commander, not his staff, should write the intent.

Field Marshal Sir William Slim said he never wrote the operation orders that went out in his name but he always wrote the "commander's intent" himself. He said, "Intent is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in the Army must be dominated. Therefore, intent should be written by the commander himself."

The commander's intent statement is intended to be written in narrative form, for clarity and emphasis of the commander's vision of the end state of the battlefield. It may include: 1. The purpose of the operation. 2. The enemy's actions and intentions. 3. The identification of the enemy's critical vulnerabilities or center of gravity. 4. A broad "vision" of how the operation will be executed. The commander's intent must include a statement of the end state of the battlefield as it relates to his force, the enemy force and the terrain. A technique to describe the end state is to start the statement with Result Desired.

Some may question why the Marine Corps teaches commander's intent to 2nd Lt's at The Basic School and to SNCO's at the Staff Academy. It may be true that the purpose, the why in the mission or task statement, normally surfaces at lower levels but not always. The following example demonstrates how important it is for the subordinates to
understand their commander's intent and the one above. Refer to enclosure(1) for the example. The Commanding Officer of the company gathers his Lts and issues his commander's intent. For example, "I have been tasked, on order to destroy the radar site on objective "A" in order to prevent enemy detection of subsequent allied air strikes."

The where and why of the mission has now been stated to his subordinates. He then issues his concept of operations: 1st Platoon, that I will lead, on order will destroy the radar tower on objective "A" in order to prevent enemy detection of allied air strikes.

Before the Company Commander issues his commander's intent he must know or should know his higher commander's intent. This is done by direct communication or by a careful mission analysis. Then the intent that he issues must support his commander's intent and be clear and concise. In this example, we will assume the Company Commander had just received orders to destroy the radar site, objective "A", on order to prevent the enemy detecting the airstrike on downtown...shortly thereafter. He continues with his order and states that Second Platoon will, on order, neutralize the enemy on objective "B" to prevent reinforcement of objective "A" during 1st platoon assault. Third platoon, on order, will block the enemy's motorized forces east of objective "C", in order to prevent enemy reinforcement of objective "A" during 1st Platoon's assault.

In this example, the commander's intent clearly defines that in order for the mission to succeed, the radar site at objective "A" must be destroyed. So far a piece of cake, but what about the what ifs?

Each platoon has its own mission, but what if the chopper goes down and takes 1st platoon and the company commander with it. The 2nd and 3rd platoon leaders have and
understand their commander's intent and will not sit with their thumbs up their nose at their objective but will coordinate with one another to take out objective "A", so the mission succeeds. They will have seized the opportunity and will not have remained frozen because they did not receive further orders to attack objective "A". Since intent takes priority over the mission, it would not matter if the missions on objective "B" and "C", were successful, if objective "A" was not taken out, the mission failed.

Let's use the same example but under different circumstances. The platoon leader of 3rd platoon is killed, which leaves the platoon's SNCO in charge. If he understood his platoon leader's intent, and was told the company's commander's intent, then the chances for the mission to succeed without additional orders remain the same.

Knowing and understanding commander's intent is just as important to the ground unit as it is to the supporting units. Picture the aviator whose mission is to destroy two bridges in the AOA. Simple enough, so he takes off but without knowing or understanding the Ground Commanders Intent. He successfully destroys the two bridges with whose destruction he was tasked and has some ordnance left over. He decides to attack a third bridge and renders it inoperable. That third bridge was the bridge the Ground Commander was using for continuing his attack. Knowing the commander's intent is important to all unit leaders.

For the mission to succeed on the ever changing battlefield, the subordinate leader must understand his commander's intent, so when things change or become chaotic, communications fail, the Lt or whoever is next in charge, can seize the initiative and achieve the required end state. Remember, the commander's intent, the purpose or (why) takes precedence and is predominant over the specific operational task or
mission assigned.

A lot can be learned from military history through the careful study of certain military campaigns, but sometimes the wrong conclusions can be drawn. Robert E. Lee's campaign at Gettysburg is one of these campaigns. Many articles have been written and studies conducted on the battle of Gettysburg and have shown the Confederates failed at both the operational and tactical levels of warfare. I also believe this campaign demonstrates the failure of Lee to properly convey his intent to his Corps Commanders. Ignorant of their commander's intent, Lee's Corps Commanders failed to take the initiative to exploit the battlefield and subsequently lost the battle of Gettysburg. I believe this may have resulted from Lee not having developed in his own mind his campaign plan or intent. Lee's Gettysburg campaign is full of mistakes, but I will just focus on the significant events in which Lee failed to properly convey his intent to his commanders, and how it affected the outcome of the battle.

After the Union's defeat at Chancellorsville, in May of 1863, Lee believed that the Union Army must be defeated in the North. The Confederate victory at Chancellorsville encouraged Lee that such a campaign had a high probability to succeed. During the battle for Chancellorsville, Lee lost General "Stonewall" Jackson, which led to a major reorganization of the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee explains his loss at Gettysburg as a result of Jackson's absence. "If I had Stonewall Jackson with me so far as a man can see, I should have won the battle of Gettysburg."2

With Jackson gone, Lee divided Jackson's corps in two with Generals R. Ewell and A.P. Hill as the corps commanders, and retained Longstreet as Commander of 1 Corps. Hill and Ewell had never handled more than a division in battle before.3 Dividing the
corps put an additional burden on Lee in managing an effective command and control of the Army of Northern Virginia. At the most critical hour of its history, Lee placed two-thirds of the Army under new corps leaders. A.P. Hill's inexperience and Ewell's indecision in the face of discretionary orders would prove fatal. Lee's army was made up not only of two untried corps commanders, but three of the nine divisions were under new leaders, and there were seven freshly promoted brigadier generals in the infantry. Six of the infantry brigades were led by senior colonels, with a third of the cavalry directed by officers who had not previously served with the Army of Northern Virginia. The artillery and cavalry had been redistributed and the most experienced of the corps commanders, Jackson who was daring and brought to the battlefield speed and discipline was lost." These changes were made on May 30th, days before the march north.4 To explain the reorganization of the Army is to foresee Lee's results at Gettysburg. As the result of the major reorganization of the Army of Northern Virginia, at no other time was commander's intent so important and needed to be thoroughly conveyed to Lee's Corps Commanders. In all, Lee had 70,000 men ready to march north, to where was really unknown.

Lee favored secrecy of command and lack of written orders. His orders were discretionary, vague and frequently verbal. In the official records of the U.S. War Department, it is conspicuous that no sooner is battle engaged than Lee's written orders cease.5 Lee did not enjoy writing and could not bear to be annoyed with the considerations he considered matters of routine.6 Lee continued this style of leadership and with his commanders unable to adapt, the results were disastrous.

Lee had two very different campaign plans. One plan was to stay in Pennsylvania as
long as possible to relieve Virginia of the burden of supporting his Army. In this he wished to avoid a general engagement but would try to catch the Union Army off balance and destroy it in detail. The other plan in which Lee is quoted has having adopted was to engage the Army of the Potomac at the first practical opportunity and defeat it in a decisive battle. Confederate General Isac R. Trimble stated Lee said: "We have again outmaneuvered the enemy... I hope with these advantages to accomplish some single result and to end the war, if providence favors us."8

Without a clear understanding of his own plan, Lee's plan was unlikely to succeed. This will become evident as we review some of his orders to his commanders and see that his decision not to decisively engage on the first day at Gettysburg, but relentlessly pursues the Union on the two following days.

Lee's troubles began with the discretionary orders he gave to General Stuart, his cavalry officer. Lee instructed Stuart to carry out a variety of operations: "To hold the mountain passes south of the Potomac, raid round the rear of Hooker's forces encamped around Fredericksburg VA., Ben about Leesburg VA, damage his communications and eventually place himself on the right of General Ewell about York in Pennsylvania."9 If we examine the orders Lee gave to Stuart, we can see the "why" is lacking, not to mention the "when" and the "where." These discretionary orders allowed Stuart the freedom to act independently, which he did but what is more important created an intelligence gap, which was to cost Lee the chance to win the battle in the initial phases. Lee's infantry then marched blindly into southern Pa not knowing the enemy's size, location or disposition of his forces.

Edward Stackpole, in his book The Story of the Three Days at Gettysburg writes:
"The impression is widespread that the absence of the cavalry under Stuart deprived Lee of the eyes of the Army." It was Stuart himself who was missed; as a result, Lee did not use his organic cavalry for reconnaissance; therefore he knew little of the terrain. Had he a thorough knowledge of the terrain in S.E. Pennsylvania which the Union occupied, like General Longstreet, he may have had another plan for the second day. But, as it turned out, Lee knew neither the size of Meade's Army nor his troop disposition for the battle.10

Lee's orders to Stuart lacked the purpose of the operation, the vision of how the operation will be executed and, more importantly, lacked the statement of the end state of the battlefield as it related to his force, the enemy's force and the terrain.

As the Confederates moved northward, Ewell and his corps moved north into the Shenandoah Valley with Hill and Longstreet in trail. Longstreet's was on the eastern side of the Blueridge mountains to cover Hills and Ewell's advance north. Since Lee's Army was strung out from Ewell in Chambersburg, Pa, to Shenandoah where Longstreet was, it indicated that Lee was not expecting to engage in any major battles. Hill's received orders from Lee that instructed him to hold the enemy, to retreat southward if overwhelmed and to pursue if Hooker evacuated Stafford Heights. "You are desired," Lee wrote, "to open any official communications sent to me, and if necessary, act upon them, according to the dictates of your good judgment."11 These orders were the last Hill received until the evening of 1 July. As Hill was on the outskirts of Gettysburg one of his division commanders, General Harry Heth, asked, "If there is no objection, he and his division would go into Gettysburg and get shoes." With Hills response "none in the world," the fate of Gettysburg lay. General Heth headed into Gettysburg for supplies
with his division.12 There Heth encountered what he thought was a small force of Union troops, probably militia, and chose to stay and put his division on line and prepared to advance. He was unaware of Lee's no general engagement order.13 Heth waited for hours for Hill or Lee to come and give him further orders. This is exactly what happens when leaders do not clearly understand commander's intent. Ewell's Second Corps was approaching Gettysburg in obedience to Lee's orders he received on 1 July while at Harrisburg, and became heavily engaged with Union forces. It is interesting to note the orders Ewell received to return to Gettysburg ended with "...As circumstances might dictate." General Isaac Trimple stated that when Ewell received theses orders he made the comment, "Why can't a Commanding General have someone on his staff who can write an intelligible order?"14 Because of the engagement, Ewell shifted his entire Corps to Gettysburg and enroute he received additional orders from Lee, "If the Confederates encountered the enemy in large force, they were to avoid a general engagement, if practicable, until the entire Army was at hand."15 Lee arrived while Rhodes, one of Ewell's division commanders, was heavily engaged. Heth asked Lee if he should attack to support Rhodes. "No," Lee said, "I am not prepared to bring on a general engagement today, Longstreet is not up." This is consistent with his earlier intent. But with one Confederate division already engaged and another one coming, we will never understand how Lee defines a general engagement. Lee remained on Seminary Ridge the remainder of the day and watched the events unfold. When Early's division joined in on the attack later in the day and was pushing the Union soldiers back, Lee decided to take the offensive.

By the afternoon of 1 July, the Confederates were pushing the Union back into
Gettysburg and were about to continue the assault when Ewell arrived. Ewell halted the Confederate's pursuit of the Union Army towards Cemetery Hill, which was weakly defended. Ewell explained his actions to General Trimple: Trimple asked Ewell, "Well General, we have had a grand success, are you not going to follow it up and push our advantage?" Ewell answered, "General Lee has instructed me not to bring on a general engagement without orders, and I will wait for them." Trimble insisted that Lee's orders were no longer valid and insisted Ewell had the leeway to adapt his orders to the tactical situation. Nevertheless, Ewell stood by them even when Cemetery Hill was confirmed to be emptied.16 Once again, if Ewell would have understood Lee's intent he would have continued the fight and quite possibly changed the outcome of the battle. As Ewell halted the advance, he received a second set of orders concerning Cemetery Hill from General Lee. Lee instructed Ewell..." To carry the hill occupied by the enemy, if it was possible."17 Presented with this dilemma, Ewell decided not to press the attack.

The first day of fighting had ended. Without commander's intent being clearly conveyed to subordinate commanders and in a timely manner, compounded with the loss of Stuart and his cavalry to reconnoiter the area, the South was unable or unwilling to carry the day with a decisive victory or even to seize key terrain, Cemetery Hill. The results were to be greatly felt in the following two days of battle.

As the Confederates regrouped for the second day, Lee realized that if Ewell had continued in his attack on Cemetery Hill he would have won his decisive battle against the Union away from home. Lee's subordinate commander's lack of understanding of Lee's intent, combined with Lee's leadership style, prevented the south from capitalizing on the tactical situation for the campaign it began with Lee's vague and discretionary
orders to General Stuart. By not having Stuart, Lee has lost a significant intelligence asset that was so very critical at the start of the campaign where he would have been able to concentrate his forces and overwhelm the Union forces at Gettysburg. Rather than influencing the battlefield, Lee was forced to react and join a battle that he did not choose. A second reason for the Confederate's defeat was Ewell's failure to take Cemetery Hill on day one, according to Douglas S. Freman in his biography of Lee. True, Ewell failed to follow on the attack, but I would argue it was due to Ewell being a new corps commander under Lee and not familiar with Lee's methods of command. Ewell had been accustomed to explicit orders under General Jackson, and he did not know how to react to Lee's ambiguous orders and consequently was undecided if he could adjust Lee's orders on his own initiative.18

Lee issued discretionary orders to his commanders throughout the day. His orders to Hill, "You are desired...act upon them according to the dictates of your good judgment," and to Ewell, "If the officers found the enemy too large, try to avoid a general engagement, if practicable until..." are excellent examples of improperly conveying or issuing commander's intent. In this case there was a direct correlation between the failure to understand intent and the results on the battlefield. Additionally, what about Lee's failure to take charge late in the afternoon on the first when he was with A.P. Hill, watching the events unfold? Lee's passivity just compounded the already poor situation.

That night Lee met with Ewell, Hill and Early to discuss the next day's plans. Longstreet had returned to his command. Its ironic that Lee never met with his Corps commanders on the 1st or 2nd day in a single meeting to discuss his plans for the next days battle. In fact, he never personally met with Longstreet in the night of the second to
discuss face to face the disastrous third day. Lee had worked out several plans, to include an all out attack on the right flank, but Early and Ewell argued against it saying it would hurt morale to give up ground already won that day. Lee's final plan had Ewell and Hill on the left flank and middle with Longstreet on the right flank. Longstreet was to be the main effort in the attack against the Union's left flank while the remaining corps commanders made assaults in support. Ewell was given orders to exploit any opportunity, and to convert his offensive into a full blown attack.19 As mentioned the initial formulation of the plan was given in the absence of Longstreet.

Depending on whose side you're on, Lee's or Longstreet's, will determine on which version you will agree with on what happened next. Some historians say that Longstreet knew that the attack was to take place at sunrise, while others say that Lee's final announcement was, "We will attack the enemy as early in the morning as practicable. Another version according to Col. S.L.A. Marshall, not exactly an eye witness, was that Longstreet received his orders at 11am, on 2 July which ordered him to begin the attack as soon as possible.20 The plan called for an echelon attack in synchronization with the unit on each other's right flank. Ewell, who was 4-5 miles from Longstreet's Corps, was to begin the attack when he heard Longstreet's cannon fire.21 Since there is no evidence to contradict Lee's statement, we will assume for general arguments that Lee purposed to take the offense as soon as practicable.

Lee in the early afternoon on the second day rode over to talk with Longstreet to see why the attack was delayed. Longstreet said he was waiting for General Lafayette Law's unit to join him. Why Lee had not ordered Longstreet to begin his attack then will never be known, but if Longstreet was not following Lee's orders then Lee should have ordered
him to do so at once. So perhaps Lee said: "If practicable" or "ASAP."

Lee had given different verbal orders to his commanders to conduct a very, difficult plan, which required intricate coordination among three corps. Lee's style of leadership of giving vague and discretionary orders and hoping his corps commanders and some divine intervention would prevail was not enough to insure its success.

The Army of Northern Virginia was arranged the following way for the attack. Longstreet's Corps had Hood and McLaw's Division on the right; Hill's Corps had Anderson's and Pender's Divisions in the middle with Ewell's Corps; Rodes, Early and Johnson were on the left.

Longstreet, after receiving his orders at 11am, was not ready to execute until his Third Division under General Laws had joined them. Longstreet then started the attack around 4pm The original plan, which depended on an early morning attack, was then destined to fail. Longstreet's corps was not strong enough to overwhelm the Union Army division which had occupied the strategic high ground and had to fall back. Ewell's attack accomplished very little. "The whole affair was disjointed," Col. W. Taylor wrote, "There was an utter absence of accord in the movement of the several commands."

Because of Lee's poor leadership style, the South had gained nothing. During the days battle, Lee had watched from Seminary Ridge, but he had only sent one message to and received only one report from during the day's events, according to British observer Colonel Fremantle. Sources do not name the individuals that Fremantle refers to. Fremantle goes on to say that it was evidently Lee's system to arrange the plan thoroughly with his corps commanders and then to leave to them the duty of modifying and carrying it out to the best of their abilities.22
Why did Lee fail at Gettysburg? I would contend that General R.E. Lee's failure to convey his intent to this subordinate commanders and his failure to take charge of his Army at critical points early on day one and two caused the Confederates to lose at Gettysburg. Let's review the events where Lee's failure to communicate commander's intent had a significant impact on the outcome of the battle.

The first reason for Lee's failure at Gettysburg would be the reorganization of his entire Army one month prior to Gettysburg. Non-familiarity among Corps Commanders and other leaders was the most important reason that Lee needed to be very explicit with his intent and maintain tighter control. Lee's failure to change his style of leadership to his newly formed Army, resulted in the South's defeat at Gettysburg. Secondly, Lee's failure to decide in his own mind whether to avoid a general engagement with Union forces or to decisively engage. A commander cannot convey his intent if he has not clearly defined it in his own mind. Next would be with Stuart's operation. In an operation that was so far from the command element, Lee should have conveyed his intent through written orders and given very explicit instruction as to the "why" since Lee would lose control of his cavalry once Stuart left. Third was Lee's vague orders to General Ewell and Ewell's failure to take Cemetery Hill because he had been used to explicit orders, never discretionary. And finally, failure to properly convey his tactical campaign plan to his subordinate commanders, especially on the second day. The Confederate front was over five miles long and communication between the flanks was slow and nonexistent when obscured by mist from the gun powder's smoke. Coordination of the attack without detailed planning or active leadership on Lee's part during the second day contributed significantly to the South's failure. The
misunderstanding of commander's intent showed itself throughout the campaign, which culminated with the lack of unity of effort on day 2 and 3 of the battle.

Conclusion

Although FMFM-1 does not plan on fighting Gettysburg, studying Lee's campaign offers the military leader an outstanding lesson in understanding the importance of commander's intent. Lee's failure to clearly define his intent in his own mind made it impossible to properly convey it to his subordinate commanders. His failure to convey his intent, was the key role in the outcome of the battle.

The Marine Corps school system is teaching its leaders the importance of commander's intent but it may not be enough. As modern day warfighters, where the battlefield is stretched over thousands of miles and changes rapidly, subordinates must have a thorough understanding of their commander's intent to be able to act upon their own initiative effectively. Face to face briefs are the best way to convey intent, but in today's world a concise, succinct message will often be the norm.

The commander needs to formulate his intent clearly in his own mind with a vision of the end state of the battlefield. When he has done this, then be must be able to convey his intent to his subordinates. If this process does not take place, then the commander, like Lee, will lack unity of effort and fail.


3 Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign, p12

4 Douglas S. Freeman, R.E. Lee (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p11

5 J.F.C. Fuller, Grant and Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) p244

6 Ibid p245

7 Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign p.8


9 Fuller, Grant and Lee, p195
Edward Stackpole, They Met at Gettysburg (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1956)

Douglas S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1972) p73

Ibid, p78

Ibid, p81

Harry W. Pfanz, Gettysburg, Culps Hill and Cemetery Hill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1921) p32

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