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Lee

In Search of the Decisive Battle at Gettysburg

MICHAEL J. FORSYTH

Gen. Robert E. Lee is clearly among the outstanding tacticians to emerge from Civil War historiography. His record of tactical success has few peers and includes such battles as Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. Each of these engagements demonstrates Lee's firm grasp of defensive and offensive warfare. Furthermore, both Second Manassas and Chancellorsville show Lee's keen understanding and expert use of the Napoleonic turning movement as described by Antoine de Jomini in his treatise on the art of war.¹ However, Lee's unparalleled grasp of Napoleonic tactics may have been the albatross that prevented greater success at the operational and strategic levels of war. At Gettysburg, Lee attempted to achieve the ultimate Civil War victory in one great battle in Pennsylvania. While Lee had a firm grasp of strategy, operations, and tactics, he failed at the two higher levels at Gettysburg because he became so engrossed with the tactical details and the possibility of achieving an Austerlitz that he lost his focus on directing a campaign linked to political ends. This contributed to the Confederacy's demise and provides a textbook example of a commander reverting to where one is comfortable—in Lee's case, the tactical level of war.

Current military doctrine defines three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. The strategic level is the domain of politicians and the most senior military leaders. At this level the national political leaders define the parameters of what the war must achieve—the end state—and what constitutes successful prosecution of the conflict. Their military advisors provide advice on how best to use

the military in order to achieve that end state or whether or not it is possible to meet the objectives. The operational level is the province of the senior military leaders. The generals receive the strategic goals from the political leaders and translate them into tangible military plans—a campaign—capable of achieving the end state. Before defining the tactical level, we must first define the term “campaign.”

Gen. Robert E. Lee photographed in March 1864.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

¹ Antoine Henri de Jomini, *Art of War*, in *Roots of Strategy*, ed. Curtis Brown (Mechanicsburg PA: Stackpole Books, 1987) 2:511–12.

A campaign is a series of battles and engagements linked across time and space that achieve the articulated objectives at the strategic level. The tactical level is the employment of units in combat—battles and engagements—in the face of the enemy designed to gain local advantage.² Based on these definitions, we must ask the question, was Lee's plan for Gettysburg designed as a campaign or a battle? In other words, was Lee seeking success through an operational campaign or in a single battle? I contend that while Lee had a sound campaign plan designed to achieve political ends, he operated at the tactical level of war, seeking strategic success through a decisive battle. His fighting blood rose with the tide of the action, diverting his focus away from the larger campaign objectives. In short, he attempted a coup de grâce in one action at Gettysburg rather than taking the long view of the unfolding events.

Lee derived his campaign objectives following Chancellorsville during a series of conferences in Richmond with the Confederacy's senior political leaders. Several courses of action were offered to meet the exigency of the situation. With Vicksburg invested, something favorable to the Confederacy had to be done to restore equilibrium in the West. The courses considered included sending direct relief to the Vicksburg garrison, reinforcing Braxton Bragg in order that he might take the offensive against William S. Rosecrans's army in Tennessee, or undertaking a second invasion of the North in the East. Lee favored this last course as the most practical and the quickest way to achieve tangible results. He not only convinced President Jefferson Davis and the cabinet, but he also won over Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, who had wanted to aid Bragg.³ Thus, in June, preparations began for a second incursion north of the Potomac.

In deciding to move north from Virginia, Lee had to design a campaign to achieve political ob-

jectives that were two-fold. First, President Davis wanted the situation stabilized in the West to maintain the territorial integrity of the Confederacy along the Mississippi. Second, Davis sought to use a victorious campaign to weaken the Union government and war effort to such a point so as to bring the Lincoln administration to the negotiating table. Here, Davis hoped to use the leverage of a successful campaign to achieve a settlement providing for an independent South. To achieve these ends, Lee planned to transfer operations from Virginia into southern Pennsylvania. Following are his stated campaign objectives:

1. to draw the Union army north away from the Rappahannock line;
2. to take the initiative and disrupt Hooker's offensive plans for summer;
3. to drive Union forces out of the Shenandoah Valley;
4. to draw Federal forces away from other theaters to the East; and
5. to provide Virginia a respite while living off the land in Pennsylvania.⁴

These were his stated objectives, but did he intend more? Lee's pattern of thought suggests he did seek more. James McPherson opines that Lee also sought a psychological success linked to Davis's second political objective.⁵

Lee was known to have closely followed political developments in the North by reading newspapers. A stated purpose of the campaign in Maryland in 1862 was to affect the midterm elections in 1862. Although not directly defined in the campaign objectives for 1863, it is reasonable to surmise that Lee intended the campaign in Pennsylvania to benefit the Northern peace movement. Lee was well aware that Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville had caused a precipitous fall in Union morale. Therefore, if Lee could get into south-central Pennsylvania and wreak havoc while winning a couple of engagements, it would deliver the peace movement greater momentum. This could lead to the Democrats win-

2 The military definition of the term "end state" is "the set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives." For more on this and the other military definitions referenced here, see Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0: Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), especially 6-1 through 6-4, as well as the glossary.

3 Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Random House, 1963) 2:431-36; James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1896; New York: Mallard Press, 1991), 334-37, citations refer to the Mallard Press edition; James M. McPherson, "To Conquer a Peace? Lee's Goals in the Gettysburg Campaign," *Civil War Times*, March-April 2007, 26-33.

4 Reports dated July 31, 1863, and January 20, 1864, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 27, part 2, 305-11.

5 McPherson, "To Conquer a Peace?" 22-28.

President Jefferson Davis. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

ning control of Congress, the ousting of Lincoln, and the creation of favorable conditions for a negotiated settlement recognizing Confederate independence.⁶ The key was to focus on the big picture, which was using the extended campaign to achieve the political objectives and avoid becoming absorbed in the tantalizing tactical details of a single battle.

The campaign kicked off on June 3, 1863, when Lee began to slip westward toward the passes leading to the Shenandoah Valley. Within days, Ewell's Second Corps (Jackson's former command) had gobbled up Maj. Gen. Robert Milroy's Union forces around Winchester, clearing the valley while the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia slid northward to the Potomac crossings into Maryland. Meanwhile, Stuart's cavalry corps began the ill-

fated raid that left Lee blind at a critical point in the campaign and, in my opinion, invited Lee to become heavily involved with prosecuting a battle rather than looking ahead two or three moves on the military chessboard. In the last week of June the Army of Northern Virginia was spread out in a wide swath in southern Pennsylvania, threatening the capital at Harrisburg while sustaining the army from the abundance of the Cumberland Valley. The Federal government was in a state of panic while Northern governors were calling out their militias and demanding action from the Army of the Potomac.⁷ It seemed that Lee's intent, both stated and unstated, was succeeding with great results, but this was not the case. By June 28 Lee learned the truth that his army was in great danger, forcing him to scramble to concentrate it.

On that date, Stuart had been separated from Lee for about five days. In that span the Army of the Potomac had undergone a change of command and moved with surprising alacrity to interpose itself between the Army of Northern Virginia and the national capital. Unbeknownst to General Lee, the Army of the Potomac was within a day's march of fragments of his widely scattered units. Should the Federal army achieve surprise, it could defeat the separated elements in detail. As luck would have it, this did not occur, because Lt. Gen. Longstreet had the foresight to employ his own personal scout to keep him apprised of enemy dispositions. On the evening of June 28 Longstreet relayed the report of the spy to Lee. The realization of the proximity of the Army of the Potomac and associated danger convinced Lee that he had to concentrate the Army of Northern Virginia and prepare for battle.⁸ Without Stuart nearby and with the loss of Jackson, Longstreet, as Lee's most experienced corps commander, was the only individual left to assist Lee in making tactical dispositions for the fight. This lack of two of his three most trusted subordinates probably caused Lee to believe that he had to exert greater than normal control over the tactical arrangements.⁹ Thus, at this point, Lee lost sight of the larger ends of the campaign.

The first day of the Battle of Gettysburg start-

⁷ Foote, *The Civil War*, 2:439–45.

⁸ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 346–48.

⁹ Jay Luvaas, "Lee and the Operational Art: The Right Place, the Right Time," *Parameters*, Autumn 1992, 2–18.

⁶ McPherson, "To Conquer a Peace?" 22–28.

ed with encouraging results. Despite the scattered condition of his forces, Lee was able to bring his army together within three days; and when A. P. Hill's Third Corps made initial contact, the Army of Northern Virginia outnumbered the lead elements of the Army of the Potomac by some twenty-eight thousand to eighteen thousand. The converging Confederate army came together north and west of the town along a line running from the Chambersburg Pike in an arc through Oak Hill down to Rock Creek.¹⁰ They acted like a vice squeezing the stretched-out wing of the Army of the Potomac under Maj. Gen. John Reynolds within that arc. By midafternoon Lee's preponderance of force began to tell as the Union First and Eleventh Corps fell back, streaming through Gettysburg in retreat. Lee observed this and identified the high ground south of the town—Cemetery Hill—as the key to winning the engagement. As a result, he issued an order telling Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell to take the hill “if practicable.” Ewell decided it was not practicable.¹¹ After Ewell's failure to follow through on Lee's suggestive order, Lee began to take more direct control of the tactical dispositions, although he still provided latitude within his subordinates' immediate unit zones. This is evidenced by the fact that he decided to continue the current engagement and by his deployment of forces. Focus on the larger picture envisioned by the campaign was becoming blurred by the perception that Lee might end the war in this one encounter at Gettysburg.

The second day, July 2, proved far more frustrating than the successful meeting engagement of the previous day. Lee, his fighting blood up now, decided to continue fighting at Gettysburg rather than slipping around the Federal army as Longstreet counseled.¹² Contrary to the advice of his trusted subordinate, Lee took control of the battle and sent Longstreet's corps on a wide flanking movement around the Army of the Potomac's left aimed at the Round Tops. The intent of this maneuver was to turn the Federal army arrayed along Cemetery Ridge out of its defensive position. The movement

and subsequent assault failed in part because of delays in the movement of Longstreet's corps and poor reconnaissance of the Federal position. But another cause was the poor coordination of the Army of Northern Virginia's wings. Lee felt that the army had come very close to achieving a decisive victory but had come up just short.¹³ Lee now assumed even tighter control of the tactical arrangements and developed a plan to win decisively on July 3.

The previous forty-eight hours had proven frustrating in the extreme for General Lee. He had started the campaign focused on the broad goal of negatively influencing the Northern public to sway them in favor of the peace movement. By moving unfettered through Northern territory, it was believed that the Confederacy would demonstrate to their people that the Union army could not stop a determined Rebel force. This would bring down Union morale so that President Davis could introduce a minister plenipotentiary to seek a negotiated peace.¹⁴ Incident to achieving these political ends was winning engagements on Northern soil. Thus, Lee believed he could not disengage from the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg without a clear victory—which Longstreet might have argued was achieved on day one when the Army of Northern Virginia defeated the First and Eleventh Corps. Heading into the third day, Lee then exerted nearly complete tactical control at the expense of the larger strategic vision. A big reason for this may be that Lee thought his Austerlitz opportunity had arrived.

On the evening of July 2 and the early morning of July 3 Lee surveyed the situation and considered the tactical possibilities. Over the previous two days, the Army of Northern Virginia had battered the Army of the Potomac relentlessly and had come very close to delivering a stinging defeat to the Federals. But the Confederates failed to deliver the decisive blow. Lee believed that his own army's failures, combined with some timely maneuvers on the part of the enemy, had saved the Federals. Specifically, the Army of the Potomac had pulled together just enough troops on Cemetery Hill on July 1 to arrest any further advance by the Confederates. On July 2 delays by the Rebels in executing the flank-

¹⁰ Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg—Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 34–44.

¹¹ Arthur V. Grant, “Operational Art and the Gettysburg Campaign,” in *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, ed. Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips (Washington DC: Center for Military History, 2007), 366–69; Thomas Goss, “Gettysburg's ‘Decisive Battle,’” *Military Review*, July–August 2004, 11–16.

¹² Grant, “Operational Art and the Gettysburg Campaign,” 369, 372–73.

¹³ Grant, “Operational Art and the Gettysburg Campaign,” 373–74; Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg—the Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 105–6, 426–27.

¹⁴ McPherson, “To Conquer a Peace?” 26–33.

ing move to the right had allowed the Federals to get just enough troops arrayed at critical points like Little Round Top to blunt the drive on that day. Now Lee believed that the Army of the Potomac—in full force—had heavily reinforced its wings at the expense of the center. Here lay his opportunity.¹⁵

As a classically educated, trained, and experienced officer, Lee was well aware of Napoleonic history. He knew about Napoleon's famous battles such as Austerlitz and Jena-Auerstadt. Lee was also well aware that Napoleon won more than one campaign as a result of a single, decisive battle. Was that sort of opportunity presenting itself here? Lee, having lost sight of the larger campaign plan and beset by less than stellar performances by multiple subordinates, appears to have believed the opportunity had arrived. Thus, he arrayed his forces on July 3 to break the Federal line in the center, where he believed it weakest, much as Napoleon had at Austerlitz. That afternoon, Lee launched the famous "Pickett's charge" to deliver the coup de grâce.¹⁶ As we know, the charge was an abysmal failure, and within forty-eight hours the Army of Northern Virginia was headed back to Virginia in a disheartening retreat. As the Confederate invasion receded, only fleeting hopes remained that the Rebels could win independence.

General Lee was as fine a strategist, operational artist, and tactician as history has ever known. Yet a combination of factors before and during Gettysburg conspired to cause Lee to fail at all levels of war in this campaign. First, Lee did not have the luxury of consulting two of his three most trusted subordinates. Jackson had died in May following Chancellorsville, and he sent Stuart away on his ill-fated raid. In their place, he had the untried corps commanders A. P. Hill and Richard S. Ewell. The lack of counsel and initiative, normally provided by Jackson and Stuart, plus blindness from lack of cavalry, left only Longstreet, who counseled a different approach. Thus, Lee began to turn inward and manage the tactical aspects that he normally left to his subordinates as the battle progressed.

Second, when the promise of the engagement slipped away due to poor coordination after day

one, Lee began to exert firmer control over the tactical details at the expense of the operational and strategic objectives. The reason for this is probably that Lee perceived that he could not entrust Ewell, Hill, and even Longstreet with the tactical dispositions, following the failure to take Cemetery Hill, the arguments with Longstreet, and the poor management of the flank march to the Round Tops. The remedy for failed initiative and intransigence was to exert greater control, which Lee did steadily over the subsequent two days. Thus, immediate tactical objectives were in sight as the battle wore on, at the expense of the operational and strategic goals. These frustrations convinced Lee that he must see the battle through of his own determination.

Finally, Lee may have believed that the opportunity to win the campaign in a single battle had arrived. Since his most trusted subordinate on the field, Longstreet, disagreed with his assessment, Lee was then the only one who could see that the tactical arrangements were brought to fruition. As a result, Lee had now lost complete sight of achieving the political ends through a campaign and staked all on a single tactical engagement.

I do not believe that Lee was a failed strategist or operational artist. On the contrary, he was uniquely gifted, as demonstrated by the plans and counsel he developed and further confirmed by the assessment of such eminent historians as James McPherson and Jay Luvaas. Rather, Lee's failure at Gettysburg is attributable to his allowing circumstance to divert him from his strategic and operational vision. As the aforementioned factors accumulated, Lee reverted to taking firm control of the tactical situation at the expense of the operational and strategic. The decision to do so proved fatal in the battle and in large measure also doomed the entire Confederate war effort.

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¹⁵ Michael Forsyth, "Did Robert E. Lee Experience Recognition-Primed Decision Making at Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Magazine* 38 (January 2009): 107–13.

¹⁶ Forsyth, "Recognition-Primed Decision Making," 107–13.