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Origins of the Sickles-Meade Controversy in Gettysburg Battlefield Reporting

JOHN T. MILLER JR.

The public airing of the Sickles-Meade controversy over events at the Battle of Gettysburg is usually dated from the appearance of the anonymous “Historicus” letters in the *New York Herald* in March and April 1864.¹ But in fact newspaper reports written while the battle was ongoing gave distinct anticipations of a conflict and previewed the arguments later put forward by Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles and his partisans.²

Among the stories filed from the battlefield, comments on Sickles’s performance were almost entirely laudatory of both his physical courage and tactical acumen, including and especially on July 2. Of eleven stories pertaining to Sickles and the Third Corps, only two pointed out the weakness created by their advance beyond the Cemetery Ridge line on July 2. Neither story criticized Sickles directly. On the other side, one battlefield article explicitly criticized Maj. Gen. George Meade for neglecting vulnerabilities on the Union left, a major point of later indictments of the commander by Sickles and his supporters. This was just the first trickle in a “Caspian Sea of ink.”³ But the initial advantage was decidedly to the political general.

A Pugnacious Politician

Proudly self-described as a “tough . . . Tammany Hall Democrat,” Daniel Sickles had a checkered

1 Letters to the editor that were supportive of Sickles and critical of Meade, signed “Historicus” (and usually assumed to be by Sickles), appeared in the *New York Herald*, March 12 and April 4, 1864, repr. in George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Major-General, United States Army* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 2:323, 337 (hereafter Meade, *Life and Letters*, with all subsequent citations referencing volume 2).

2 For fuller treatment of Gettysburg press reporting, see John T. Miller Jr., “Breaking the News from Gettysburg: Battle Reporting in Myth and History,” *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 48 (2013).

3 Richard A. Sauer, *A Caspian Sea of Ink: The Meade-Sickles Controversy* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1989).

Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade. Courtesy of the National Archives.

relationship with the press throughout his career in politics and government during pre-Civil War years.⁴ When appointed secretary to the American Mission in London in 1853, he was praised as an excellent choice by both the *New York Herald* and the *New York Times*.⁵ But the *Times* later decided they had “overrated him,” lamenting “the injury inflicted upon [the nation’s] interests and character by

4 James A. Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2009), 41.

5 *New York Weekly Herald*, July 30, 1853; *New York Times*, August 1, 1853.

Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles. Courtesy of the National Archives.

sending bullies instead of gentlemen to represent us abroad.”⁶ This after Sickles had created a public stir in London by denouncing a wealthy American expatriate for toasting the queen before the president at a July Fourth observance.⁷

In 1856 the *Herald* criticized Sickles for “negligence and carelessness” in handling legislation for creation of New York’s Central Park as a member of the state senate.⁸ In 1857 they opined that “Mr. Sickles belongs to that class of politicians who can look one way while rowing another, and argue with both sides that it is all right.”⁹ Sickles decried the *Herald*’s “impudent falsehoods.”¹⁰ And when they accused him of stealing from the post office, he sued them for libel. The case was settled out of court. Sickles and *Herald* publisher James Gordon Bennett later

reconciled, and the *Herald* was a Sickles booster during his military career.¹¹

When as a U.S. congressman Sickles murdered his wife’s lover in 1859, he received muted comment, and his acquittal was generally approved of. But he was roundly condemned when he subsequently reconciled with the guilty spouse. He should “withdraw himself” from public life was the *Herald*’s advice. And he did decline to run for reelection to Congress in 1860.¹² For a time, a “Sickles case” became a stock phrase for the murder of a spouse’s paramour.¹³

Seeking Cincinnatus: Ironwall Sickles

In contrast to the often hostile comments upon his political activities, press coverage of Sickles’s military career was substantially favorable, even lavish—the mystique of Cincinnatus, perhaps. Political differences no longer sparked press criticism, and he did have the professional politician’s ability and propensity for cultivating the Fourth Estate. “We know that he has accomplished more by personal address, adroitness, and cunning management of newspaper correspondents, than by actual display of military ability,” wrote an anonymous detractor.¹⁴ His heroic image had been “literally made by scribblers,” complained Brig. Gen. Alpheus Williams.¹⁵ Yet it was not the scribblers who promoted him to major general and gave him command of an army corps.

At the outset of the war, Sickles’s initiative to raise an infantry brigade was met with some negative press and predictable derision.¹⁶ But the *Herald* praised his effort.¹⁷ And “Huzza for Brig. Gen. Sickles,” wrote the *Philadelphia Press*.¹⁸ Even his notoriety as a murderer was somehow in his favor: “Our country’s destroyers may yet feel the power of Gen. Sickles [*sic*] weapon more keenly than did the miscreant who destroyed his home,” suggested the *Cleveland Herald*.¹⁹

11 Douglas Fermer, *James Gordon Bennett and the New York Herald: A Study of Editorial Opinion in the Civil War Era, 1854–1867* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 94n.

12 *New York Herald*, July 19, 1859; see also Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg*, 18.

13 For example, see *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, January 1 and 23, 1860; *New York Herald*, June 1 and August 25, 1860; *Cleveland Herald*, January 1 and 12, 1860.

14 Unsigned article in the *New York Round Table*, March 12, 1864, repr. in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 322.

15 Quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 209.

16 Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg*, 22–23.

17 *New York Herald*, May 17, 1861.

18 *Philadelphia Press* item in *Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 17, 1861.

19 *Philadelphia Press* item in *Daily Cleveland Herald*, October 14, 1861.

6 *New York Times*, November 7, 1854.

7 Thomas Keneally, *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General, Dan Sickles* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 41–42.

8 *New York Herald*, June 13, 1856.

9 *New York Herald*, September 9, 1857.

10 *New York Herald*, May 22, 1857.

One of the few attacks on Sickles during the war came not from Northern journalists but from the Confederate Adalbert J. Volck. This pointed political cartoon suggests that Sickles recruited for his brigade the way Tammany Hall solicited votes—plying the disreputable with liquor and tobacco. In this sketch, the brigade sets up shop in front of a liquor store, recruiting among the ragged ruffians of New York’s notorious Five Points neighborhood. At left, someone holds a placard reading, “The Capitol in Danger, Sickles Brigade to the Rescue!!!” At right, a “Mrs. Higby” is handing out free pipes. Below her, a corporal is picking an officer’s pocket. All are oblivious to the preacher, at left, as someone swipes his toupee. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Coverage of Sickles’s performance in the field was uniformly glowing. After Chancellorsville one reporter dubbed him Ironwall Sickles with obvious reference, and favorable comparison, to the fallen Stonewall Jackson.²⁰ In view of the disappointment at Chancellorsville, Bennett’s *Herald* endorsed Sickles to replace Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac. He was “the man for this position,” having shown in the recent campaign “the skill and coolness of a great commander in the hour of action and the crisis of danger.”²¹ When he took convalescent leave after

Chancellorsville, the *New York Times* lamented the rumor that he would not return to the front. He had “developed a very high capacity for military service” and “proved himself thoroughly competent and complete master of himself and of his position.”²²

In any event, Sickles did rejoin the Army of the Potomac on June 28, at Frederick, Maryland, and resumed command of the Third Corps.²³

Anticipations of Controversy

In press coverage at the Battle of Gettysburg, Sickles continued to receive highly favorable comment. Reporters were very ready to criticize command performance when they saw fit. But critiques at Gettysburg were generally positive, and Sickles got rave reviews beyond any other general.

Moreover, stories filed during the battle includ-

²⁰ *New York Times*, May 10, 1863. Perhaps hoping the descriptor would stick, Sickles picked it up in his Chancellorsville report, filed May 20, referring to his corps’ “imposing attitude of an iron wall of infantry.” U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 25, part 1, 389 (hereafter cited as *OR* and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1).

²¹ *New York Herald*, May 9, 1863.

²² *New York Times*, June 17, 1863.

²³ Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg*, 74.

ed anticipations, and approximations, of a number of arguments offered on Sickles's behalf in the controversy with Meade that later erupted after Sickles's testimony before the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, in February 1864.²⁴ These included the following assertions:

- The Third Corps arrived at Gettysburg on July 1 in time to contribute to securing the Union position on Cemetery Hill.
- Sickles's maneuvers precipitated the battle of July 2, to the advantage of the Union side.
- Meade was negligent in failing to attend to the Union left wing and in ignoring Sickles's urgent requests for clear instructions.
- Sickles's positioning of his corps on the second was not an advance beyond the assigned position but a change of front to face the enemy attack.

Regarding the first day of the battle, correspondent D of the *Philadelphia Press* reported, "During the early part of the day our forces failed to make any impression upon the rebels, and fell back one or two miles. General Sickles, however, arrived with reinforcements, and turned the tide of the battle."²⁵ D said he had come to Gettysburg from Emmitsburg, presumably with units of the Third Corps, "arriving near the army later in the day," no doubt after fighting had stopped.²⁶ Someone gave D a rather overstated version of the Third Corps contribution.

Sickles and supporters did not claim that the

Sickles' Corps Another "Stonewall."
Thanks to the skill, efficiency and military experience of the gallant SICKLES, every movement of theirs tending to their advantage was promptly met and defeated, while, notwithstanding their real superiority of force and position, the undaunted Third stood their ground nobly, and thus did they continue to hold their own.

Most press reports overstated the success of Sickles's Third Corps on July 2, generally with no mention of the forced retreat from their advanced position. This example headline is taken from page 1 of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 6, 1863. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Third Corps had been part of the fighting on July 1. But Historicus suggested that Sickles's arrival was important to securing the Cemetery Ridge position: the Union "position was eminently critical" after the retreat to Cemetery Hill, "when,

to the great relief of both the General [Howard] and our valiant troops, a division of the Third corps, under the immediate command of General Sickles, arrived, and the fighting of that day was at an end."²⁷ There is clearly a sly suggestion that the fighting ended *because* Sickles had arrived. Sickles's congressional testimony was a little more circumspect, stating simply, "The arrival of my force seemed to reassure General Howard in the security of his position."²⁸ But on subsequent occasions, he did at least imply that his arrival had been material to holding Cemetery Hill.²⁹

For day two, ten reporters filed stories directly or implicitly bearing upon the performance of Sickles and his corps. Two of these simply made generally favorable remarks. Lorenzo Crounse of the *New York Times* wrote that the Union left wing was universally "felt to be secure under the protection of the invincible Third corps."³⁰ Said the *Times* editorially, "Gen. Sickles has literally carved his way to fame with his sword."³¹ (Also, however, "Gen. Meade's genius has shown resplendent.") According to Bonaparte of the *New York World*, when Longstreet attacked, "General Sickles and his splendid command withstood the shock with a determination that checked, but could not fully restrain it."³²

Of those reports that described Third Corps

²⁴ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1865), 295. (hereafter cited as *Report of the Joint Committee*).

²⁵ D, *Philadelphia Press*, July 3, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.

²⁶ D, *Philadelphia Press*, July 3, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.

²⁷ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 324.

²⁸ *Report of the Joint Committee*, 297.

²⁹ Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg*, 95.

³⁰ Lorenzo Crounse, *New York Times*, July 4, 1863.

³¹ Editorial, *New York Times*, July 6, 1863.

³² Bonaparte, *New York World*, July 7, 1863. Although datelined Gettysburg, July 4, I believe that Bonaparte was probably an editorial figment and that the article was a compilation of other reports. See Miller, "Breaking the News," 110.

movements, the greater number said that Sickles's advance to the Emmitsburg Road was a reconnaissance in force that precipitated or confronted the Confederate attack. All these stories assumed that he was acting under orders from Meade.

The *Herald's* G. W. Hosmer stated that Sickles "was ordered to advance" and (inconsistently) that "the Third corps took the initiative" to advance.³³ Either way, the movement flushed out the enemy attack, "which might otherwise [have] come when we were not so well prepared to receive it."³⁴

Under the headline "Sickles' Corps Another Stonewall," the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that "the Third Corps had been pushed forward, up to and a mile beyond the Emmettsburg road, in order to intercept a . . . movement to outflank us on the left," and that "the gallant Sickles . . . promptly met and defeated" every Confederate move.³⁵

33 G. W. Hosmer, *New York Herald*, July 4, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.

34 Hosmer, *New York Herald*, July 4, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 2, 1863.

35 "Sickles' Corps Another Stonewall," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 6, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 4, 1863.

The *New York Herald* featured the first *Historicus* letter, with multiple decks of bold headlines and an editorial note endorsing the allegations against Meade as factual. The article appeared on March 12, 1864. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Responses to *Historicus* by Meade's defenders received muted presentation and no editorial comment, such as this example published in the *New York Herald* on March 18, 1864. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Whitelaw Reid of the *Cincinnati Gazette* said that it was Meade who had detected the vulnerability on the Union left and ordered Sickles to advance, seeking to "unmask" Confederate intentions: "The corps moved out, spiritedly of course—when, even in disastrous days, did it go otherwise into battle?—and by 4 o'clock had found the rebel advance."³⁶

Similarly J. R. Sypher of the *New York Tribune* reported that "Gen. Sickles [was] ordered forward to develop the enemy's intentions," precipitating the Confederate attack.³⁷

Charles Carleton Coffin of the *Boston Journal* wrote, "In the afternoon the 3d corps was ordered to advance across the fields and reconnoiter the enemy on the left. . . . Sickles advanced nearly a mile. . . . It was not the intention of Gen. Meade to bring on the

36 Whitelaw Reid, *Cincinnati Gazette*, July 8, 1863, an extended summary report, datelines July 1–4, 1863. Repr. in James G. Smart, ed., *A Radical View: The "Agate" Dispatches of Whitelaw Reid, 1861–1865* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1976), 2:17–18. Highlights are discussed in Tony L. Trimble, "Agate: Whitelaw Reid Reports from Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 7 (1992).

37 J. R. Sypher, *New York Tribune*, July 6, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 4, 1863.

Lorenzo L. Crounse of the *New York Times*. From Albert D. Richardson, *The Secret Service, the Field, the Dungeon, and the Escape* (Hartford, ct: American Publishing, 1865).

battle, but the enemy was ready, and in reality had begun to move at the time the 3d advanced.”³⁸ In his memoirs, Coffin later claimed that he had observed the initial action of Thursday from Little Round Top and that he had noted the vacancy of that position along with Brig. Gen. Gouverneur Warren. But his original news report said that he was “near the cemetery” when Thursday’s battle began, and his account is confused, stating that the Confederates “secured” Little Round Top, to be driven off by the Pennsylvania Reserves.³⁹

The idea of a reconnaissance in force was not repeated as such by Sickles or his advocates. But the view that Sickles had brought on the battle, to Union advantage, was the kernel of a principal argument in the pro-Sickles case. It was subsequently bolstered by the allegation that Meade had no

³⁸ Charles Carleton Coffin, *Boston Journal*, July 7, 1863, dateline July 2, 1863, but the article covers the battle though July 3.

³⁹ Charles Carleton Coffin, *Eyewitness to Gettysburg: The Story of Gettysburg as Told by the Leading Correspondent of His Day*, ed. John W. Schildt (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1997), 83; republication of portions of Charles Carleton Coffin, *Marching to Victory: The Second Period of the War of the Rebellion Including the Year 1863* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1889).

intention to fight at Gettysburg but intended to retreat. So, but for Sickles, there would have been no Battle of Gettysburg and no glorious outcome.

The *New York Tribune* for March 8, 1864, reported a summary of Sickles’s congressional testimony, evidently leaked by pro-Sickles sources, including the assertion that “the battle was precipitated by Gen. Sickles, and forced on Meade in part by the enemy, but principally by General Sickles,” while Meade had “seemingly no purpose to fight.”⁴⁰

Sickles testified that information he had received convinced him that Meade “intended to retreat from Gettysburg.”⁴¹ The *Historicus* letter in the March 12 *Herald* stated flatly that “General Meade had decided upon a retreat.”⁴² Precipitating the July 2 fighting was in Sickles’s view tantamount to initiating the Battle of Gettysburg, per se: “We in the army . . . regard the operations of Thursday and Friday, when the whole army was concentrated as the battle of Gettysburg.”⁴³

⁴⁰ *New York Tribune*, March 8, 1864, datelined Washington, DC, March 7, 1864, repr. in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 320.

⁴¹ *Report of the Joint Committee*, 298.

⁴² Meade, *Life and Letters*, 326.

⁴³ *Report of the Joint Committee*, 295.

Whitelaw Reid of the *Cincinnati Gazette*. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

A Rough Draft of Historicus

The one reporter who made pointed reference to a disagreement between Sickles and Meade was Thomas M. Cook of the *New York Herald*, and he pointedly took Sickles's side in the matter. Cook wrote that the Confederate attempt to capture a certain "range of hills" (not identified, probably meaning the Round Tops) "had been defeated by the fortitude and military skill of General Sickles, who saved the army and the day by assuming the responsibility of changing the front of his corps" to meet the enemy.⁴⁴

"Repeatedly" throughout the day, Sickles had warned Meade of a threat from the south but was required keep a front facing west.⁴⁵ Sickles "protested" but "without avail."⁴⁶ Only when the Confederate attack had begun did Meade allow Sickles to shift his front. This was at the council of war, which was still mulling a battle plan. Cook made no mention that Meade had himself ridden to view the situation on the left. Now "Gen. Sickles galloped away to the field, and, in less than ten minutes . . . changed the front of his corps, and advanced to an elevation a little to his front, to meet the attack."⁴⁷ Had Sickles been allowed "to make the change earlier in the day," Cook lamented, "we should doubtless have had a less sanguinary though no less glorious record."⁴⁸

Cook's piece strikingly parallels arguments later made by Historicus, principally (1) that Meade had been negligent by ignoring Sickles's concerns about the vulnerability of the Union left flank and (2) that Sickles's maneuver was a change of front, not a significant advance beyond his assigned position or the established Union line. Cook is more or less a rough draft of the second Historicus letter.

Regarding Meade's performance, the details differ somewhat. Cook says Sickles asked for approval to change front and was refused. Historicus, echoing the Sickles testimony, says simply that Sickles "was left without orders, in spite of his urgent entreaties" to Meade, who "was entirely engrossed

Charles Carleton Coffin of the *Boston Journal*. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

with . . . plans for retreat."⁴⁹ Only belatedly did Meade ride the left and promise reinforcements to meet the advancing Confederates.

Either way, the failure was Meade's.

Most critically, Cook anticipated the central argument of the second Historicus letter: that Sickles's maneuver was essentially a change of front, rather than an advance detaching the Third from the rest of the Union line.

This argument did not appear in the first Historicus letter, which simply detailed a number of dispositions to bolster the left flank. The change-of-front assertion of the second letter was prompted by the published responses to the first letter.

In the *Herald* of March 16, 1863, a letter from "Another Eye Witness" (who is not identified further) stated that on July 2 the Third Corps had advanced forward "from its appropriate place in general line."⁵⁰ It had been "a magnificent sight" but created critical

⁴⁴ Thomas M. Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863.

⁴⁵ Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863.

⁴⁶ Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863.

⁴⁷ Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863.

⁴⁸ Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863. Cook, like Hosmer, has it both ways, in Sickles's favor, with Sickles "assuming the responsibility of changing the front" yet nonetheless being authorized by Meade.

⁴⁹ Historicus, quoted in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 338, 326. See also Sickles's testimony, *Report of the Joint Committee*, 298–99.

⁵⁰ The response to the first Historicus by "Another Eye Witness" is from the *New York Herald*, March 16, 1864 (unlike other responses, it is not reprinted in Meade, *Life and Letters*).

gaps between the Third and the Second Corps on its right and the Fifth on its left. Subsequently, “in the attempt to extricate General Sickles from his unfortunate position these two corps lost nearly three thousand men.” And at the end of the day, “our lines were where they were first established.” Nothing had been gained for the tragic loss.

To this, the second *Historicus* letter rejoined that “the aspersion is preposterous.”⁵¹ Sickles “would have been immediately cashiered” if he had done as described. Rather, “what General Sickles did do was to make a simple manoeuvre which the movement of the enemy required. He changed his front to the left by wheeling forward the centre and right wing of his corps so as to confront the flank attack by Longstreet. No military critic would call this an advance.”

Historicus further argues, Sickles could not have opened a gap with the Fifth Corps to his left since it was not there at the outset of Thursday’s fighting. That was true. But *Historicus* glossed over the disconnect with the Second Corps on the Third’s right, implying rather that there could have been no separation since the Third did not significantly advance.

So T. M. Cook said that Sickles advanced “a little to his front” while changing front, and *Historicus* said he did not advance but wheeled “forward.” Both omitted or denied what actually happened, which was a significant advance separating the Third Corps from the Cemetery Ridge line of battle, as Another Eye Witness correctly stated.

Glimpses of the Reality

Besides the predominant praise of Sickles’s Thursday performance, there were two reports that were, at least by implication, unfavorable to his tactics—and that were therefore closer to the truth.

One of these was by correspondent “Q” of the *Baltimore American*. He was not at the battlefield but reported from Westminster, Maryland, a waypoint about halfway between Gettysburg and Baltimore. And he collated “many reports brought [there] from the battlefield.”⁵²

Q’s unnamed sources highlighted a crucial weakness on the Union left: a “space of several hundred yards, only covered by skirmishers . . . between the left of the Second Corps (first division)

and the right of the next corps on the left,” which made an opening for a deadly Confederate attack.⁵³ He mentions the deaths of Colonel Cross and Brigadier General Zook at that location, so this was the gap at the Wheatfield. It was a gap between elements of the Third Corps, not adjacent to the Second Corps as described, although the Second’s First Division (Caldwell’s) did advance attempting to reinforce the failure.⁵⁴

Q did not mention the Third Corps or its commander. But this was a dissent from the general view that the Union left was altogether in good hands. Of note perhaps is the fact that when the *New York Times* reprinted the article, they dropped this reference to a weakness in the Union position.⁵⁵

A more explicit description of the same problem came from the *Herald*’s S. M. Carpenter. He was on scene at the battlefield; and at 3:00 p.m., when he saw the Third Corps (presumably Humphrey’s division) advancing, he left his position at the cemetery and joined General Warren at the lookout post on Little Round Top. “I was struck,” Carpenter wrote, “by the apparently exposed position of our left . . . the Third Corps having advanced nearly two miles in front of us, while there was not a man to check an attack from the left,” exaggerating Sickles’s advance while others minimized it.⁵⁶

Carpenter proceeded with a vivid account of Warren’s urgent quest for reinforcements, the frightening advance of Confederates toward Little Round Top, and the nick-of-time arrival of the Fifth Corps to repel the assault.

This was a perfectly pointed eyewitness statement of Sickles’s vulnerability. It was the only statement directly critical of the Third Corps within the predominantly fulsome coverage, although Sickles was not mentioned by name. Remarkably, three columns over, on the same page of the same issue of the *Herald*, appeared T. M. Cook’s report, described above. Editors of that era, under constraints of hand typesetting and limited communications with the field, often were unable to resolve

53 Q, *Baltimore American*, July 4, 1863, dateline Westminster, July 3, 1863.

54 See Jay Jorgensen, *Gettysburg’s Bloody Wheatfield* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 2002), 37, 63, 92, 95.

55 See Q, repr. in *New York Times*, July 4, 1863. Other papers, however, included that portion; see, for example, *New York Tribune*, July 6, 1863; *Philadelphia Press*, July 4, 1863; *New York Sun*, July 6, 1863.

56 S. M. Carpenter, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863, dateline Gettysburg, July 3, 1863.

51 *Historicus*, quoted in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 338.

52 Q, *Baltimore American*, July 4, 1863, dateline Westminster, July 3, 1863.

discrepancies between articles and frequently printed contradictory reports.⁵⁷

Origins of an Alibi

For the most part, it is unclear exactly how these reporters came by their interpretations of Sickles's role in Thursday's battle. The *Herald's* Carpenter evidently observed directly from Little Round Top; Coffin of the *Boston Journal* probably from the cemetery. Otherwise, there are no specifications of vantages or sources.

Both the reconnaissance-in-force and the change-of-front stories most probably came from staff sources attempting to put a credible face on the Third Corps maneuvers. Thomas Cook evidently had an exclusive source for his unique report explicitly describing a Sickles-Meade disagreement.

Cook did speak briefly to a groggy Daniel Sickles at the field hospital, shortly after his amputation: "On rallying he discovered your correspondent at his side and recognized him with a God bless you. . . . Cook, in this war a man is but a cypher. God rules and directs all for the best."⁵⁸ Sickles was familiar with Cook from at least the time of Chancellorsville, when the reporter filed an article laudatory of Sickles, and Sickles's official report cited "Mr. T. M. Cook, a civilian who volunteered his services [not specified] early on Saturday."⁵⁹ In 1864 Cook was appointed Sickles's private secretary as a favor to get him a pass to accompany Sherman's march (against Sherman's preferences), rather than as a permanent position.⁶⁰

At Gettysburg, Cook evidently did not converse further or in any substance with Sickles before the general was carried to Littlestown en route to Washington the following day. It is unlikely that other reporters spoke to Sickles at the field hospital (it is the sort of thing they would have mentioned). But Whitelaw Reid observed Sickles's evacuation on July 3, borne on a litter, "his hands calmly folded over his breast and a cigar in his mouth!"⁶¹

The *Philadelphia Press* reported that Sickles passed through Baltimore on July 5. The report-

er talked to staff members but not to Sickles himself. The staff evidently glossed over any discussion of the Thursday operations, stating only that "on Thursday night the rebels were massed, and on Friday they were concentrated against the right wing" (very roughly the situation on Friday morning when Sickles and party departed).⁶² Likewise, a *Herald* report of Sickles's arrival in Washington gives no indication that he talked with reporters there.⁶³

Sickles was known, or notorious, for his skill at cultivating the press. But clearly he did not himself generate the immediate coverage regarding Thursday's action. It must have been Third Corps staff members at the battlefield who came up with a favorable spin on the July 2 operations, which they must have realized were subject to inconvenient questions. It is likely that Sickles himself did not form an intention to pursue an attack on Meade until he was denied reappointment to corps command, at a meeting with Meade in October.⁶⁴ But from Cook's report, it is evident that by July 3, just in case, someone was already busy devising the somewhat-slippery arguments later put forward by Historicus.

The "Scribblers" Rally to Sickles

Following Sickles's congressional testimony on February 26, 1864, a number of stories appeared based on leaks from the closed hearings, many reporting his allegations against Meade as established fact. The *New York Times* condemned Congress for entertaining complaints by Sickles and others: "There can be nothing better calculated to render our army utterly worthless, than the practice to which Congress and the Government is addicted of listening to charges made by officers against their chief, touching his strategy or tactics."⁶⁵ But other papers, including the *Herald* and *Tribune*, reveled in the seamy details.

The *Herald* of March 5 headlined "Secrets of the Battle of Gettysburg Coming Out." These secrets included "the fact that General Meade did order a retreat at Gettysburg" but was stymied "because one of the best fighting generals of the war had already commenced the battle," and a "persistent effort" to

⁵⁷ See Miller, "Breaking the News," 106.

⁵⁸ Cook, *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863.

⁵⁹ *OR*, 25.1:395; see also Thomas M. Cook, *New York Herald*, May 7, 1863.

⁶⁰ J. Cutler Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), 553.

⁶¹ Whitelaw Reid, *Cincinnati Gazette*, July 8, 1863, original emphasis.

⁶² *Philadelphia Press*, July 6, 1864, dateline Baltimore, July 5, 1863.

⁶³ *New York Herald*, July 6, 1863, dateline Washington, July 5, 1863.

⁶⁴ Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg*, 238, 252.

⁶⁵ *New York Times*, March 8, 1864.

remove Meade from command was underway.⁶⁶ The *Tribune* on March 4 likewise reported as “fact” that Meade “gave an order to retreat” on the night of July 1, “which was rendered impossible by one of his Corps commanders getting into a fight.”⁶⁷ The *Tribune* then stated on March 8 that Sickles was the corps commander in question. Meade was “substantially on trial” before the committee, and the testimony against him was “very damaging.”⁶⁸

News, speculation, and utter nonsense were disseminated far and wide. Said the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, the charges by Sickles “will make it necessary for Gen. Meade to resign command of the army of the Potomac.”⁶⁹ The *Daily South Carolinian* had it that “Meade has been court-martialed on charges preferred by Sickles.”⁷⁰

The drumbeat of publicity reached a crescendo with the *Historicus* letters in the *Herald* on March 12 and April 4, 1864. The *Herald* gave *Historicus* prominent play and explicit endorsement. The first letter was introduced by four banks of bold headlines, not usual for letters to the editor. The letters were essentially presented as factual news. An editorial note reinforced that impression, accepting the assertions as reliable: “This communication discloses some startling facts in relation to the battle that

were hitherto unknown, and which must seriously affect public opinion as the exact share of honor for the victory that General Meade is entitled to.”⁷¹ By contrast, the responses by Meade’s defenders got only simple headings and no editorial comment.⁷²

The letters and the accompanying buzz in the news coverage sustained the semi-infatuation of the press with Dan Sickles, which was not limited to his hometown New York papers, as the Gettysburg dispatches attest. The *Historicus* controversy was not the end of the argument, which persisted for decades. But neither was it the beginning. The controversy began explicitly with T. M. Cook’s report from the battlefield, while other reports contributed to the arguments later promoted by Sickles. A media meme in favor of Sickles was germinating at the battlefield, well before the guns of Gettysburg went silent.

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66 “Secrets of the Battle of Gettysburg Coming Out,” *New York Herald*, March 5, 1864.

67 *New York Tribune*, March 4, 1864.

68 *New York Tribune*, March 8, 1864.

69 *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, March 8, 1864.

70 *Daily South Carolinian*, March 13, 1864.

71 Editorial, *New York Herald*, March 12, 1863; *Historicus* letters cited above.

72 See Another Eye Witness, *New York Herald*, March 16, 1864; A Staff Officer of the Fifth Corps, letter to the editor, *New York Herald*, March 18, 1864, in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 331; Brig. Gen. James Barnes, letter to the editor, *New York Herald*, March 21, 1864, in Meade, *Life and Letters*, 332. Following the Barnes letter is one from Col. William Tilton, not included in Meade, *Life and Letters*.