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Learning the Hard Lessons of Army Command!

Maj. Gen. George G. Meade during the Gettysburg Campaign

THOMAS J. RYAN

We have certain information that Vicksburg surrendered to General Grant on the 4th of July. Now, if General Meade can complete his work, so gloriously prosecuted thus far [at Gettysburg], by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army, the rebellion will be over.

—President Abraham Lincoln¹

If I can get the Army of the Potomac in hand in the [Cumberland] Valley, and the enemy have not crossed the river, I shall give him battle . . . [however], I wish in advance to moderate the expectations of those who . . . may expect too much . . .

—Maj. Gen. George G. Meade²

Who was George G. Meade? There are contrasting responses to this question. Some observers describe Meade as a valiant Union commander who defeated the formidable Gen. Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. Others believe Meade was a hesitant pursuer of Lee's army following its defeat at Gettysburg. One writer concluded that "Meade is the Rodney Dangerfield of Civil War generals. He gets no respect." Adding, "George Gordon Meade may have won the Battle of Gettysburg, but it seems he lost the war of reputation [to Lee his opponent]."³

Edwin B. Coddington, author of the *The Battle of Gettysburg: A Study in Command*, examined the

public's perception of Meade as a military leader. He concluded that, despite widespread criticism that Meade was not up to the job as Army of the Potomac commander and was not aggressive in pursuing Lee's army after Gettysburg, this country is indebted to him for what could have been a disaster if the battle had been lost.⁴

A more personal description of Meade is seen in a letter home from an officer of the 44th New York, a regiment in the general's former command, the Fifth Corps:

The assignment of General George G. Meade to the command of this army was an event wholly unexpected by all, even by the veteran himself . . . [and] elicited the warmest sympathy of his old command, which regretting his loss, rejoiced at his promotion. . . .

In person, he is very tall, his head a little bent from age, his hair and beard a little tinged with gray, with features pale and sharp, so sharp, that with his spectacles on he looks fearfully grim under a slouched hat . . . [and] he will swear like a Sea Captain if you offend him.

In his presence you would be awed into silence and uneasiness by his dignity and self command, yet he is to be appreciated if you have business with him. I have had occasioned to go into his tent and was as courteously treated as I could wish to be. [Yet,] he is a very stern strict man, even his own son who is on his staff dare not be familiar with him.⁵

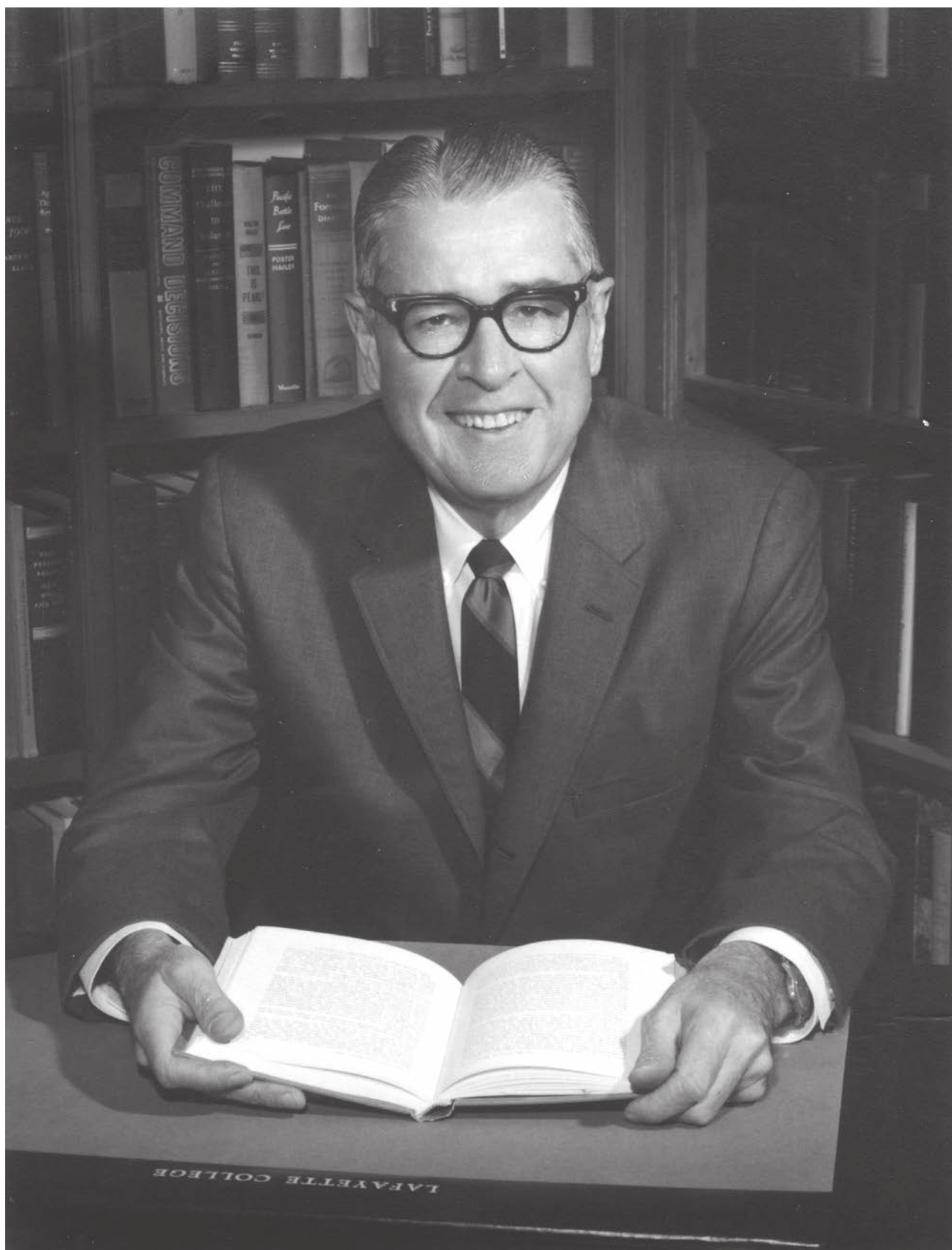
1 Text of a note Lincoln sent on July 7, 1863 to General-in-Chief Henry Halleck. Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 6. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953). Halleck forwarded this message to Maj. Gen. George Meade on July 7, 1863. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901, ser. 1, vol. 27, part 1, page 83 (hereafter cited as OR and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1).

2 Meade to Halleck, July 6, 1863. OR, 27:1:80–84.

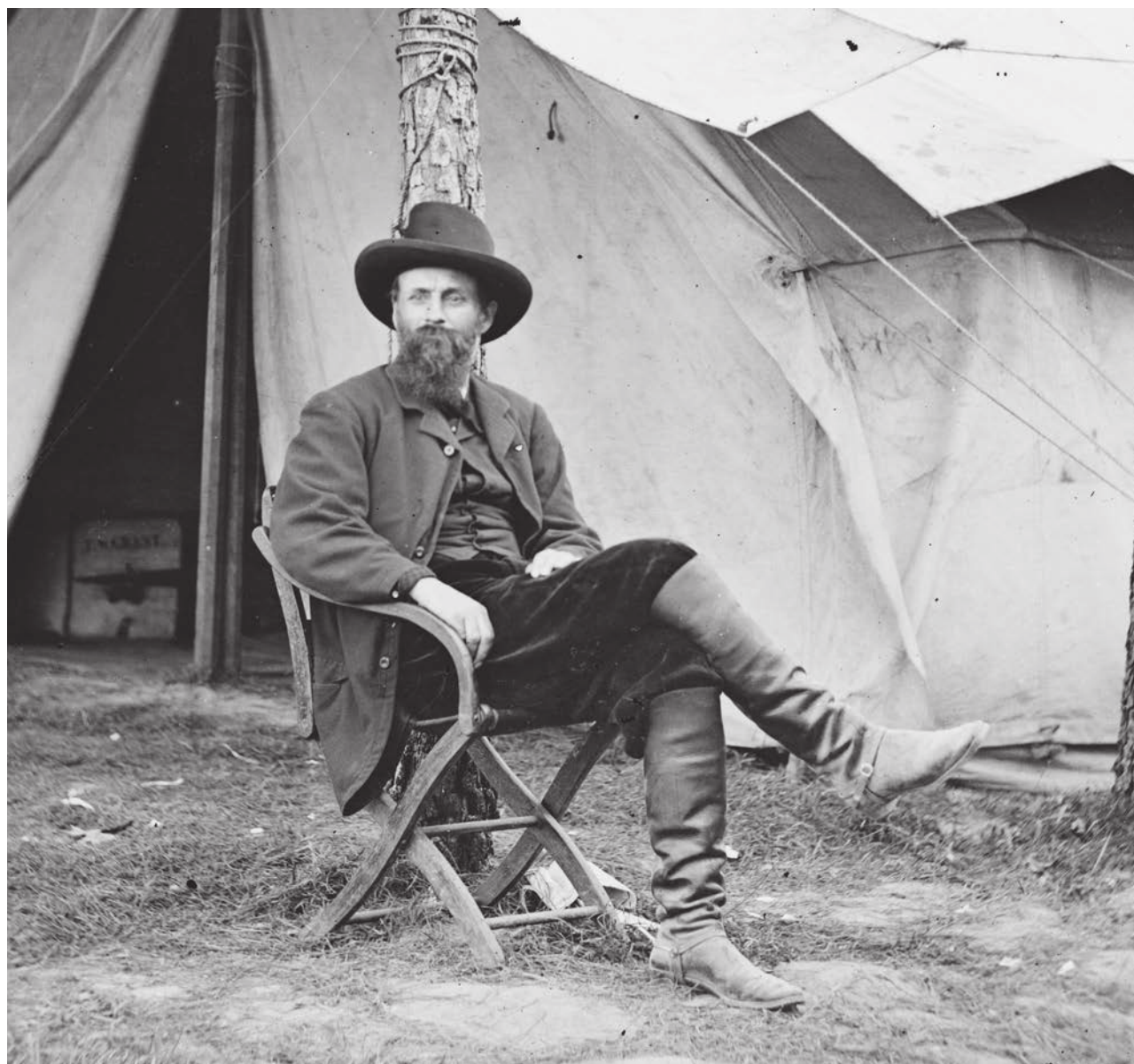
3 Tom Huntington, "Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor at Gettysburg." (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2013).

4 Edwin B. Coddington, "The Strange Reputation of General Meade: A Lesson in Historiography," *The Historian*, Vol. 23, 145–166.

5 This letter is courtesy of R.L. Murray, a New York Civil War researcher and author who shared it with the online Gettysburg Discussion Group.



Edwin B. Coddington is considered by many to be the father of modern Gettysburg scholarship. Lafayette College Archives.



Assistant Secretary of War, Charles A. Dana. Library of Congress.

This generally favorable view of Meade was not replicated by Assistant Secretary of War, Charles A. Dana, who visited the warfront in May 1864 and wrote:

In command of the army was Major-General George C. [*sic*] Meade. He was a tall, thin man, rather dyspeptic, I should suppose from the fits of nervous irritation to which he was subject. He was totally lacking in cordiality . . . in consequence was generally disliked by his subordinates.

As commander, Meade seemed to me to lack the boldness that was necessary to bring the war to a close. He lacked self-confidence and tenacity of purpose, and he had not the moral authority that Grant had attained from his grand successes in other fields. As soon as Meade had a commander over him he was all right, but when he himself was the commander he began to hesitate.⁶

⁶ Charles A. Dana, *Recollections of the Civil War: With the Leaders at Washington and in the Field in the Sixties* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

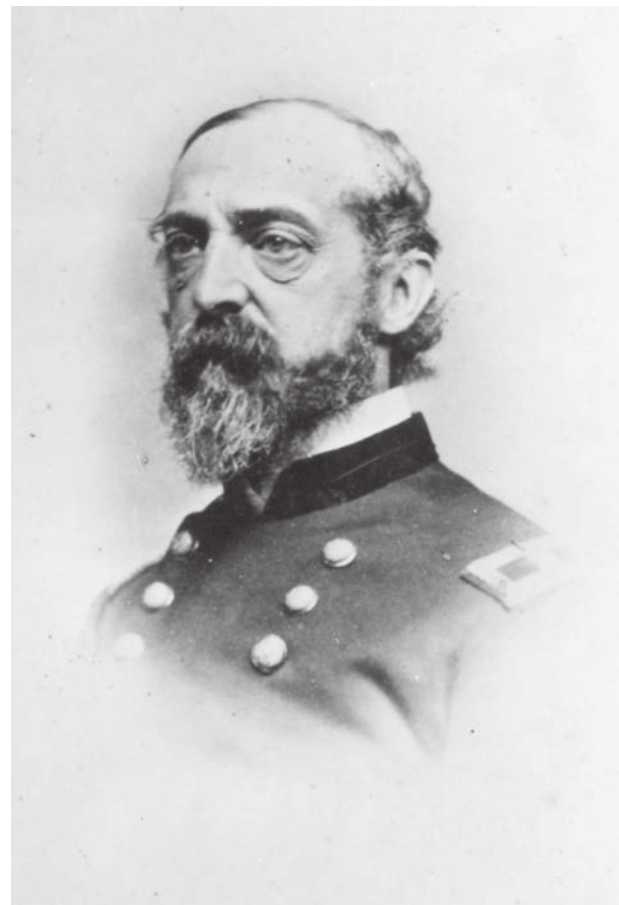
While there are similarities in these two descriptions of Meade's appearance and demeanor, they are opposites in how they view his qualifications to command an army. This reflects the present-day view of Meade that is often at a loss to pinpoint his overall capabilities, as well as his place in history.

Following Lee's escape across the Potomac River without another confrontation of the two armies in July 1863, Meade's generalship came into question for not contesting the outnumbered Rebels with vigor at that time as well as over the next nine months. When a perplexed and frustrated President Abraham Lincoln later brought Ulysses S. Grant east to take command of all the Union armies, Meade soon faded into the background and never regained the public acclaim that he received after his victory at Gettysburg. Compared to other Civil War generals, history has downplayed, if not ignored, his service in the Union army.

Regarding this situation, historian Garry W. Gallagher commented, "Once Grant arrived on the scene in the spring of 1864, Meade's position became progressively difficult because most people believed the army really belonged to the general-in-chief [Grant]." Meade's reaction was "I don't believe the truth ever will be known [regarding my contributions and abilities], and I have a great contempt for History."⁷

Why did this happen? This is not an easy question to answer. Realistically, there are reasons why Meade is often excluded from discussion of heroes at the Battle of Gettysburg, yet not much effort has been invested exploring his achievements and shortcomings as a Union commander.⁸

What is not a mystery about George G. Meade is the perception he had about the role of a commander prior to taking control of the Army of the Potomac. Over previous years as a brigade, division, and corps commander, Meade was outspoken and at times critical of those from whom he received his orders. In particular, Meade is on record about his reservations concerning Generals George B. McClellan, Ambrose E. Burnside, and Joseph



Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade. National Archives and Records Administration.

Hooker. A common theme runs through critiques of his superiors, especially with regard to their lack of aggressiveness in combat and moral authority shortcomings.

Meade's primary objective after his victory at Gettysburg, perhaps subconsciously, may have been to insure that Lee retreated back to his own territory. He emphasized this in his congratulatory note to the troops after the battle, "Our task is not yet accomplished, and the commanding general looks to the army for greater efforts *to drive from our soil* every vestige of the presence of the invader [emphasis added]." Meade's mindset on this issue was an expression of his earlier thinking which we shall examine shortly.⁹

Perhaps even more telling about his frame of mind, in the same congratulatory message to the troops, Meade flatly stated, "An enemy, *superior in numbers*, . . . attempted to overcome and destroy

⁹ OR, 27:3:519.

⁷ Garry W. Gallagher, "Voices from the Army of the Potomac, Part 2, *The Civil War Monitor*, Spring 2014, 70–71.

⁸ Meade's son George compiled the most extensive reference work about his father, and his grandson George Gordon Meade edited it. As would be expected from family members, the contents portray Meade in a favorable light. See, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).

this army [emphasis added].” There was no persuasive evidence that Lee’s army was larger than Meade’s, and considerable confirmation that the Army of the Potomac outnumbered the Army of Northern Virginia by at least 20,000 troops. Meade was exhibiting some of the same numeric lapses or fantasies for which he once criticized his predecessors McClellan and Hooker.¹⁰

In contrast, Meade’s performance during the run up to and the actual three-day battle at Gettysburg demonstrates that he worked hard to avoid repeating the mistakes he attributed to his predecessors. He acted assertively after replacing Hooker on June 28.

Although disgruntled officers in Meade’s army attempted to demean the general’s performance during the period leading to and during the Battle of Gettysburg, most objective observers see their behavior and criticisms as self-serving.¹¹ A different story unfolds, however, once Meade was cast in the role of pursuer of Lee’s retreating army. The determined leader became hesitant and cautious. Superiors, subordinates, and the press scrutinized his intentions. To understand this transformation requires examination of Meade’s political and military views and beliefs prior to assuming army command.

As Lee’s Maryland Campaign unfolded in September 1862, Meade anticipated the Army of the Potomac may have to “resist an invasion of *our soil* through Maryland . . . [emphasis added].” After the Army of Northern Virginia retreated to Virginia following the Battle of Antietam, Meade declared

that “Maryland is free, and their audacious *invasion of our soil* put an end to [emphasis added].”¹²

Meade’s mindset about “their soil” and “our soil” surfaced again during the Gettysburg campaign. Dissatisfied with Meade’s message to the troops after Gettysburg about his intent to “Drive the invaders from our soil,” Lincoln wrote to Halleck that Meade’s objectives “appear to me to be connected with a purpose to cover Baltimore and Washington, and to get the enemy across the river again without a further collision, and they do not appear connected with a purpose to prevent his crossing and to destroy him.” Lincoln explicitly directed Halleck, “If you are not so satisfied [that Lee will be “judiciously pursued”], please look to it.”¹³

Meade’s cautious approach to pursuit of Lee’s forces after Gettysburg mirrors his thinking following the Battle of Antietam when he said, “I feared at one time the movement [of McClellan’s forces] from Washington [to intercept Lee’s withdrawal into Maryland] was a dangerous one, for if we were defeated and this army broken up, the country was gone.” Rather than have McClellan pursue Lee after the Battle of Antietam in order to cause further damage to or destroy his defeated forces, Meade believed that “the country [meaning the authorities in Washington] ought to let us have time to reorganize and get into shape our new lines, and then advance”

Meade adopted a similar approach following his victory at Gettysburg. Lincoln, however, obviously was not in agreement with McClellan’s slowness in pursuing Lee’s army following the Battle of Antietam, and he was not in accord with Meade’s wary pursuit after the Battle of Gettysburg. Prior to taking command of the army, Meade’s strategic thinking had fluctuated between a conservative and an offensive-minded approach.¹⁴

Despite his hesitance about intercepting Lee or concerns about rest and reorganization for the army prior to pursuit during the Antietam Campaign, Meade criticized McClellan following the battle because “he errs on the side of prudence and caution, and that a little more rashness on his part would improve his generalship.” Col. Régis De Tro-

¹⁰ See, for example, Meade’s message to Halleck on June 28, 1863, the day he took command of the army from General Hooker. In this message, Meade forwarded a statement he received (probably from Col. George H. Sharpe, the head of Meade’s intelligence staff, the Bureau of Military Information) that Lee’s army, as counted by prominent citizens in Hagerstown as they passed through town, was something less than 80,000 men. Meade stated that this information “is confirmed by information gathered from various other sources regarded as reliable.” *OR*, 27.1:65. Although Meade later ignored these comments in claiming that Lee’s army at Gettysburg was “about 10,000 or 15,000 my superior,” he provided no information regarding sources for these latter figures. Meade elaborated by claiming that Lee had “90,000 infantry, from 4,000 to 5,000 artillery, and about 10,000 cavalry.” Meade accurately stated that his army was about 95,000 strong. Bill Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak: The Meade Hearing on the Battle of Gettysburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 119. The best estimate for the size of Lee’s army engaged at Gettysburg is 71,699. John W. Bussey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 2005), 169.

¹¹ See, for example, the testimony of Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles and Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak*, 28–56, 132–45.

¹² Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1:307, 311.

¹³ *OR*, 27.3:567.

¹⁴ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1:311; Sandburg, *Lincoln: The War Years*, 2:344.

briand, a brigade commander in the Army of the Potomac Third Corps, later made similar comments about Meade in conjunction with Gettysburg. De Trobriand opined that Meade “was not one of those formed to take the ascendancy over men by that greatness of character for whom power is an easy instrument, and who appear born to command.” De Trobriand thought that “although his personal valor and his military capacity were incontestable,” Meade was “more reserved than audacious, more modest than presumptuous [sic], on which account he treated his corps commanders rather as friends than

as inferiors.” In other words, Meade’s lack of audacity and a proclivity toward collegiality was not a formula for assertive tactics and risk-taking.¹⁵

A similar viewpoint came from Capt. Robert Beecham, a member of the Union First Corps. He wrote, “Meade, it must be confessed, was extremely cautious, too cautious to be apt to win a great victory like the capture or annihilation of the army opposed to him”¹⁶

¹⁵ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–319–21; Regis De Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1889), 518–19.

¹⁶ Captain R.K. Beecham, *Gettysburg: The Pivotal Battle of the Civil War* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1911), 128, 144.



Col. Régis De Trobriand was a brigade commander in the Third Corps. National Archives and Records Administration.

Meade’s hesitancy and caution following the Battle of Gettysburg did not conform to his critical commentary about his previous commanders. In early January 1863, soon after the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg, Meade wrote that he “was still in favor of making an attempt to whip [the enemy].” He placed himself among the “fire-eaters” (his emphasis), because “I am tired of this playing war without risks.” He unequivocally stated, “We must encounter risks if we fight, and we cannot carry on war without fighting.”¹⁷

Meade previously believed that McClellan also had this “vice,” because he “was always

waiting to have everything just as he wanted before he would attack” “Such a general,” Meade concluded, “will never command success, though he may avoid disaster.”¹⁸

Later, when Meade was serving as commander of the Army of the Potomac’s Fifth Corps, he commented that the choice should be to “carry on the war as it ought to be, with overwhelming means, both material and personal, or else give it up altogether.” He asserted that “I am tired of half-way measures and efforts, and of the indecisive charac-

¹⁷ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–345.

¹⁸ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–345.

ter of operations up to this time.” What he desired was “a vigorous prosecution of the war with all the means in our power.”¹⁹

Not long after, Meade commented on the fate of Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin on whom Burnside laid blame for the Army of the Potomac’s defeat at Fredericksburg. Meade believed Franklin “was hampered by his orders and a want of information as to Burnside’s real views and plans.” However, Meade emphasized that “A *great* [his emphasis] captain would have cast them aside and assumed responsibility.” Meade would soon be faced with a similar situation during the pursuit of Lee’s army after Gettysburg given ambiguous orders and contradictory advice he received from General in Chief Henry Halleck.²⁰

Following the Army of the Potomac’s devastating and humiliating defeat at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, Meade asserted that army commander Hooker “was more cautious and took to digging quicker even than McClellan, thus proving that a man may talk very big when he has no responsibility, but that it is quite a different thing, acting when you are responsible and talking when others are.” He lamented, “All I can say is that Hooker has disappointed the army and myself, in failing to show the nerve and *coup d’oeil* [an inner sense for decision making] at the critical moment, which all had given him credit for before he was tried.”²¹

Meade thought that Hooker “acted sincerely, and for what he considered the interests of the army and the country, but I differed with him in judgment, and I fear events will confirm my view. I was clearly in favor of tempting the hazard of the die [i.e., going on the offensive], and letting Washington take care of itself.” Meade believed that Hooker “has on this occasion missed a brilliant opportunity of making [a superior reputation for] himself.”²²

On the issue of whether or not to allow the defense of Washington to override aggressive battlefield tactics, Meade adopted a tough stance in a heated discussion with Hooker over who was or was not in favor of withdrawing from the Chancel-

lorsville battlefield. Hooker was making a concerted effort to lay blame for the humiliating loss to Lee’s much weaker army on others, and claimed that Meade had voted in council to withdraw. Meade countered, “that my opinion was clear and emphatic for an advance; that I had gone so far as to say that I would not be governed by any consideration regarding the safety of Washington, for I thought that argument had paralyzed this army too long.” Meade would alter his position on the defense of Washington after he assumed command of the army.²³

Meade argued further regarding Chancellorsville that “if the enemy were considered so strong that the safety of the army might be jeopardized in attacking them, then I considered a withdrawal impracticable without running greater risk of destroying the army than by advancing . . .” This is a further reflection of Meade’s expectations of his commander, Hooker, and the assertive stance regarding combat situations at that time.²⁴

In examining what went wrong at Chancellorsville, Meade concluded the problem stemmed from “the caution and prudence exhibited by General Hooker at the critical moment of the battle; at his assuming the defensive, when I thought the offensive ought to have been assumed; and at the withdrawal of the army, to which I was opposed.”²⁵

Meade thought Hooker’s plan was “admirably designed,” but “instead of striking at once vigorously and instantly, before the enemy, who were surprised, could concentrate, he delayed,” and then “assumed the defensive,” and then “withdrew.” Less than two months later, Meade’s previous offensive mindedness as a corps commander was not replicated as commander of the army at Gettysburg and later in pursuit of Lee’s army.²⁶

Ironically, at Chancellorsville, Meade thought the enemy commander, General Lee, had also made a serious mistake. He believed that Lee “committed a terrible blunder in allowing us to come back; he might have destroyed us by a vigorous attack while we were retreating.” Meade did not adhere to this persuasive insight following the Battle of Gettysburg when Lee’s army retreated.²⁷

¹⁹ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–358.

²⁰ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–362. For a discussion of Hooker’s decision to withdraw from the battlefield despite a desire of a majority of his corps commanders to go on the attack, see Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 420–22.

²¹ Meade, *Life and Letters*, II, 1–374.

²² Meade, *Life and Letters*, II, 1–372, 374–75.

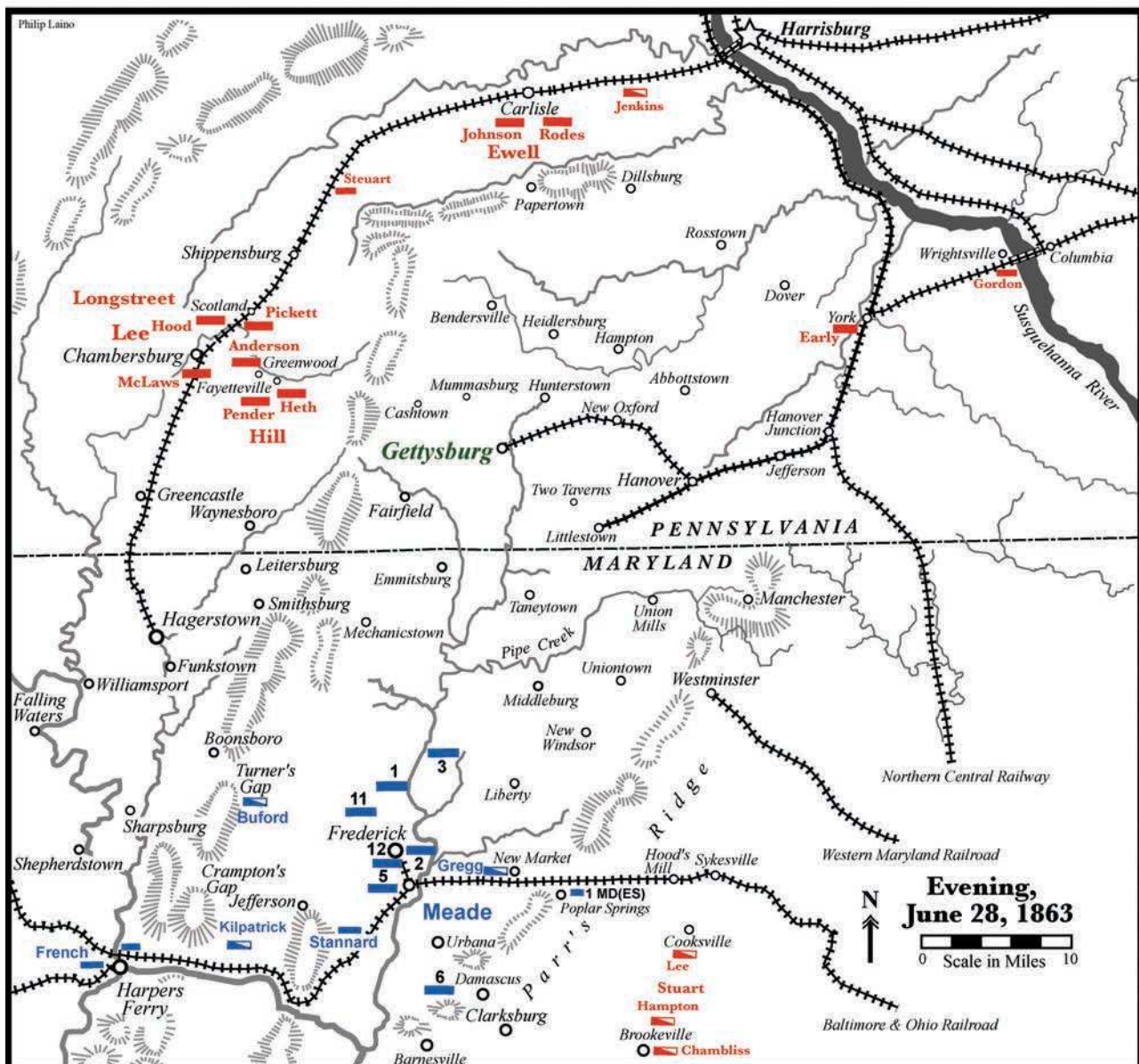
²³ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–377.

²⁴ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–377.

²⁵ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–376.

²⁶ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–379.

²⁷ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1–380.



In the pre-dawn hours of June 28, 1863, George Gordon Meade takes command of the Army of the Potomac. By nightfall, Meade has consolidated his troops around Frederick. Robert E. Lee has two of his corps near Chambersburg (Longstreet and Hill). Ewell has two divisions near Carlisle (Johnson and Rodes) and another farther south at York and Wrightsville (Early).

Hill, and Johnson's division of Ewell's corps, the Longstreet, will advance toward Gettysburg using the crowded Chambersburg Pike. Early and Rodes of Ewell's command will meet near Heidlersburg and move south and combine with Hill to drive Union forces from the north and west of Gettysburg.

The Union 1st, 3rd, and 11th corps will move toward Emmitsburg before the 1st and 11th moves to Gettysburg where Buford's cavalry are holding off Heth's advance. The 2nd, 5th, and 12th corps will drive north to Taneytown, Union Mills, and Two Taverns. The large 6th Corps will march to Manchester. As the battle at Gettysburg escalates, Meade orders his army to move toward the south of Gettysburg.

Meade's strategic approach to combat in previous campaigns prior to taking command of the army demonstrates that he occasionally preached caution, but more often critiqued his commanders for a lack of fire and assertiveness. During his pursuit of Lee's army following the Battle of Gettysburg, however, while he occasionally spoke forcefully, his actions did not match his rhetoric.²⁸

What does this examination tell us about George G. Meade in particular, and the assumption of army command in general? A number of men took charge of armies during the Civil War, but few were successful commanders. Some were beleaguered by the responsibility that came with the job, including Union Generals McClellan, Burnside and Hooker, and Confederates Braxton Bragg, Gustavus W. Smith, and John Bell Hood.

At brigade, division and corps leadership, there was a higher-ranking officer available to make difficult decisions. This was no longer the case at army level. While direction emanated from authorities in the respective capitals of Richmond and Washington; in reality, it often lacked specificity and army commanders were on their own interpreting these guidelines.

Some commanders did not function well in an independent capacity. As a result, these officers envisioned non-existent problems, and credited the enemy with unrealistic strength and purpose. Others threw caution to the wind, and credited personal prowess and army capabilities beyond reasonable potential.

When George Meade assumed Army of the Potomac command on June 28, 1863, there was little time to conjure doubts that would constrain assertiveness. The enemy was marching across Pennsylvania, and had to be intercepted and contested. The objective was to prevent Lee's army from causing major damage in the North.

Following the Union victory at Gettysburg, however, the situation became more fluid. Meade was concerned about what Lee intended to do next; whether he would direct his army to attack the Union capital in Washington, or go on another expedition through the Cumberland Valley. Meade

decided to adopt a wait and see attitude, and in effect, conceded the initiative to Lee.²⁹

Meade also did not comprehend how devastating the defeat was to the Army of Northern Virginia, and did not accept, despite ample intelligence, that his army was superior in numbers to Lee's. Meade also did not assimilate the sad state of affairs in the Confederacy revealed in letters from Pres. Jefferson Davis and Adjutant and Inspector General Samuel Cooper. These letters were destined for Lee, but captured by Union cavalry on July 2 and turned over to Meade by morning of the next day. In particular, Davis lamented the lack of resources available to reinforce Lee's army.³⁰

Davis was rightly concerned about Union forces operating in Virginia that threatened Richmond, as well as Lee's communications with the capital. Cooper emphasized in his letter to Lee, "the enemy is in this vicinity in sufficient force in cavalry, artillery, and infantry to do much harm." He added, "Every effort is being made here to be prepared for the enemy at all points, but we must look chiefly to the protection of the capital."³¹

These captured letters painted a negative picture on every front the Confederate military were engaged. They described how weak Braxton Bragg was in Tennessee, Joseph Johnston in Mississippi, P. G. T. Beauregard in South Carolina, D. H. Hill in North Carolina, and particularly Arnold Elzey's forces assigned to defend Richmond. As a result, with regard to Lee's request for reinforcements for the Army of Northern Virginia and for Richmond to assemble a force that would pose a threat to the Union capital, Davis replied, "I have not many [troops] to send you, [nor] enough to form an army to threaten, if not capture, Washington."³²

Despite advantages that should have been evident, Meade's hesitant pursuit of Lee's army after Gettysburg signifies a reconsideration of his military thinking prior to taking command of the army. His approach was more in keeping with that of previous commanders, McClellan and Hooker.

With pressure mounting, Meade claimed, despite a minimum of a 30,000-man advantage (his army

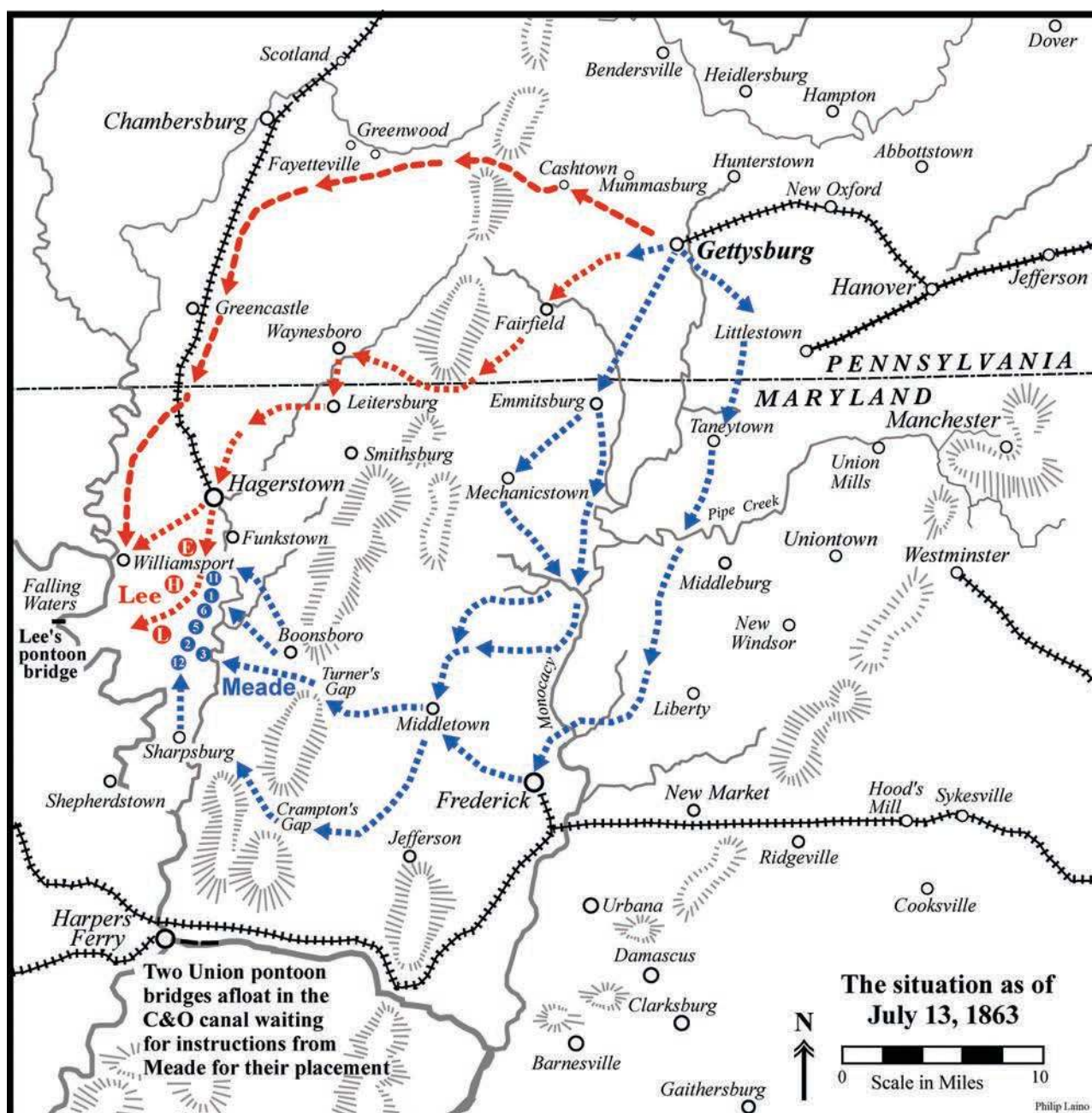
²⁸ For an evaluation of Meade's generalship following the Battle of Gettysburg, see the author's article, "A Battle of Wits: Intelligence Operations during the Gettysburg Campaign. Part 5: In Pursuit of Lee," *Gettysburg Magazine*, Issue 33, 100–128.

²⁹ OR, 27.1:80–81; OR, 27.3:537–8.

³⁰ Col. George H. Sharpe to Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, July 3, 1863, Bureau of Military Information, National Archives, RG 393; OR, 27.1:75–77.

³¹ Sharpe to Butterfield, op. cit.; OR, 27.1:75–76.

³² OR, 27.1:77.



- ① Ewell
- ② Hill
- ③ Longstreet

④ Union Corps

- Approx. route of Union Infantry
- Approx. route of Confederate Infantry
- Approx. route of Imboden's wagon train

The routes both armies followed after the battle at Gettysburg, eventually arriving in front of Williamsport, Maryland, as well as their disposition as of July 13, 1863. Meade hesitated to attack Lee's position or send troops across the river, using pontoon bridges available near Harpers Ferry, to block Lee's crossing or destroy the pontoon bridge under construction at Falling Waters. As a result, Lee's army escaped on the evening of July 13 and the morning of July 14 with only minor losses.

The routes south taken by the armies after Gettysburg. Phil Laino.

having been reinforced after the battle of Gettysburg), that Lee's army was equal to, if not superior in size, to his own. Rather than issuing direct orders, Meade acquiesced to his reluctant corps commanders who shied away from going on the offensive at Williamsport. Otherwise, Meade exhibited no initiative to limit Lee's mobility.³³

The Army of the Potomac's intelligence staff under Col. George H. Sharpe had informed Meade on July 10 and 11 that "a pontoon train was on its way between Winchester & Martinsburg, and that the enemy's ammunition train was expected to reach the river on the night of the 10th." The availability of a bridge was obviously intended to facilitate the escape of Lee's army across the swollen Potomac River, yet Meade took no action to deny Lee these resources. One option was to send troops across the river to intercept these supply trains.³⁴

Ironically, on July 7, Meade had ordered Brig. Gen. Henry Benham, commander of the Army of the Potomac's engineer brigade, to ship pontoons to Harpers Ferry so that cavalry could be sent across the river. By July 9, Benham reported from Harpers Ferry that "two bridges are in the [C&O] canal, and ready to be towed anywhere they may be needed up the river." However, Benham did not believe the bridges would be required, because the "railroad bridge [that had been damaged] can be easily repaired . . ." Despite having options for crossing the river at in the vicinity of Harpers Ferry to impede Lee's escape, Meade chose not to send cavalry or infantry across.³⁵

Another more humanitarian issue also loomed while the two armies maneuvered to gain advantage in the vicinity of Williamsport. The Rebels ferried about 4,000 Union prisoners captured at Gettysburg across the swollen Potomac on flat boats, and these prisoners were on their way southward under guard to Staunton, Virginia, a distance of 130 miles, to be entrained to Richmond prisons. One of these POWs later recorded he "never gave up hope [of being rescued by Union forces] until we had passed Winchester." He anticipated that "cavalry and flying artillery . . . [would] advance by Harpers Ferry and

Martinsburg." However, there is no evidence that Meade considered the possibility of rescuing these prisoners.³⁶

Lt. John Meigs, an engineer operating in the vicinity of Harpers Ferry requested permission from Meade to replank the railroad bridge that had been torn up in order to cross troops to the south side of the Potomac. Meade chose not to respond to Meigs' request, and did not send troops across the river to intercept Rebel pontoon and ammunition trains, block Lee's army from crossing the river, nor rescue Union prisoners.³⁷

Meade also learned from Colonel Sharpe that, if necessary, Lee was planning to "cover his retreat [northward] toward Hancock [Maryland]." This was accurate information, since Lee sent a regiment from Brig. Gen. John Imboden's cavalry brigade toward the upper fords of the Potomac to cover the army's movement to another crossing point if it was driven away from Williamsport. Imboden later wrote that this regiment was "to act as an advance and guide if [Lee] should require it." Yet the Union commander made no effort to counter this move, despite the availability of over 25,000 Union troops operating to the north of his position, a portion of which could have been employed as a blocking force to hinder Lee's movement in that direction.³⁸

The pressure of high command was indeed taking its effect. In a letter to his wife, Meade informed her that he had to "fight Lee." But he "would rather do it at once and in Maryland than to follow into Virginia," and expected to "again hazard the fortune of war," since Lee had not yet crossed the river.³⁹ Yet when the Army of Northern Virginia safely crossed the river before another battle could be fought and Meade learned of Lincoln's dissatisfaction, he complained about the authorities in Washington expecting him "to do what I know in advance it is impos-

33 Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 559–562; Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak*, 419.

34 Sharpe to Assistant Adjutant General Seth Williams, July 10 and 11, 1863, National Archives, RG393.

35 OR, 27:3585–86, 618.

36 Imboden, "The Confederate Retreat from Gettysburg," *Battles and Leaders*, III, 428; John L. Collins, 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry, "A Prisoner's March from Gettysburg to Staunton," *Battles and Leaders*, III, 432.

37 OR, 27:3607–8, 618, 632.

38 Sharpe to Williams, July 10, RG393; OR, 27:3987–88; *Battles and Leaders*, III, 428–29; Keith Poulter, "Errors that Doomed a Campaign," *North & South*, August 1999, 86–87. These troops were mainly emergency militia under Dana (11,000) near Chambersburg, Smith (4,000) near Waynesboro, and Pierce (6,700) near Mercersburg, but those under Kelley (4,500) near Clear Spring were regulars. Also, some regulars from Milroy's force that escaped the Confederate attack at Winchester in mid-June were mixed in with the militia forces. The cavalry regiment Lee sent up river to keep open a route through that area numbered barely 600. Steve French, *Imboden's Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign* (Berkeley Springs, WV: Morgan Messenger, 2008), 14.

39 Meade *Life and Letters*, 2: 132–33.



The Army of Northern Virginia escaping across the Potomac River into Virginia by Edwin Forbes. Library of Congress.

sible to do.” Meade pleaded his case that the army was “exhausted,” and yet he was being “*spurred* [his emphasis] to attempting to pursue and destroy an army nearly equal to my own, falling back upon its resources and reinforcements. . . .” In reality, as they faced each other near Williamsport, the Army of the Potomac was nearly twice the size of its opponent, and Davis’ captured letter had stated that reinforcements would not be forthcoming to Lee.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding his criticism of former commanders, McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker for their poor generalship at critical times, Meade despondently told his wife that what was happening to him now “has been the history of all my predecessors, and I clearly saw that in time their fate would be mine.” While in pursuit of Lee’s army, after it had crossed to the south side of the Potomac, Meade again criticized his superiors in Washington for insisting, in his words, “on pursuing and destroying Lee.” He believed, “The proper policy for the Government would have been to be contented with driving Lee out of Maryland, and not to have advanced till this army was largely reinforced and reorganized. . . .”⁴¹

In displaying traits he previously criticized in his commanding officers, Meade illustrated how difficult the psychological leap was from corps to army commander. His reputation has since evolved as a good but not great general, and the victor at Gettysburg has faded into near anonymity. History tends to favor heroes and scoundrels, and overlooks those who routinely perform well but do not seize the initiative in times of extraordinary military and political circumstances.⁴²

In a poll of historians concerning the top ten generals during the Civil War, Meade was not included among the twenty-four names mentioned. In a study about Civil War commanders, Meade barely rated a mention.⁴³ Part of the problem with Meade’s public image is the dearth of commen-

tary or memoirs by his wartime colleagues, and the sparse historical writing about him over the past 150 years. In 1960, Freeman Cleaves published the only major biography of Meade until Tom Huntington’s in 2013. In 2003, Ethan S. Rafuse added a study of Meade’s service as a commander in the Eastern Theater.⁴⁴

Writings about Meade that have appeared in periodicals often absolve him from criticism in his pursuit of Lee’s army following the Battle of Gettysburg. These articles have focused almost exclusively on whether Meade should have assaulted Lee’s entrenched positions at Williamsport. One commentator credited Meade with “Having the moral courage not to order a senseless attack against impregnable fortifications that would result in the needless sacrifice of soldiers should be the historical legacy of George G. Meade.”⁴⁵ Overlooked are options other than a direct assault Meade had available to further damage the Army of Northern Virginia. In contrast, another writer examined Meade’s approach to the pursuit, and found it wanting on several counts: a “fatal pause” in getting underway, “a lackadaisical pursuit,” poor “use of cavalry,” and failure to send “a blocking force” across the river. The conclusion was that “clear-sighted decisions and prompt action by Meade might have” brought about the destruction of Lee’s army.⁴⁶

The post-war writings of Brig. Gen. Abner Doubleday, who commanded a division in the First Corps at Gettysburg, agreed with this assessment:

I do not see why the force which was now promptly detached from the garrisons of Washington and Baltimore [to reinforce Meade’s army] and sent to Harper’s Ferry could not have formed on the Virginia side of the Potomac opposite Williamsport, and with the co-operation of General Meade have cut off the ammunition of which Lee stood so much in need. As the river had risen and an expedition sent out by General French from Frederick had destroyed the bridge

⁴⁰ Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2: 134–35; Sharpe to Butterfield, op. cit.; OR, 27:1:77. Davis informed Lee that he was sending Maj. Gen. Montgomery D. Corse’s brigade of Pickett’s division to rejoin the Army of Northern Virginia. However, that brigade would not rejoin Lee until his army had crossed over the Potomac and moved south to Winchester.

⁴¹ OR, 27:2:135–136.

⁴² For further discussion on this subject, see Coddington, “The Strange Reputation of General Meade, 145–166.

⁴³ Woodworth, Stephen E., Reid Mitchell, Gordon C. Rhea, John Y. Simon, and Steven H. Newton “Who Were the Top Ten Generals”, *North & South*, May 2003, 12–22; William C. Davis, *The Commanders of the Civil War* (London: Salamander Books, 1999).

⁴⁴ Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960); Huntington, *Searching for George Gordon Meade*, op.cit.; Ethan S. Rafuse, *George Gordon Meade and the War in the East* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ Col. Kavin Coughenour, “Assessing the Generalship of George G. Meade during the Gettysburg Campaign,” *Gettysburg Magazine*, Issue 28, January 2003, 37.

⁴⁶ Keith Poulter, “Errors That Doomed a Campaign,” *North & South*, vol. 2, no. 6, August 1999, 88.



Gen. Ulysses S. Grant left a detailed analysis of Meade's leadership capacity. Library of Congress.

at Falling Waters, everything seemed to favor such a plan.⁴⁷

It well may be that Grant, his commander during the last year of the war, provided the most perceptive and measured evaluation of Meade as a military officer and as a person when he wrote with the dispassion that a thirty-year interim permits. Some excerpts:

“General Meade was an officer of great merit, with drawbacks to his usefulness that were beyond his control.”

“He saw clearly and distinctly the position of the enemy, and the topography of the country in front of his own position. His first idea was to take advantage of the lay of the ground, sometimes without reference to the direction we wanted to move afterwards.”

“He was subordinate to his superiors in rank to the extent that he could execute an order which changed his own plans with the same zeal he would have displayed if the plan had been his own.”

“He was brave and conscientious, and commanded the respect of all who knew him. He was unfortunately of a temper that would get beyond his control, at times, and make him speak to officers of high rank in the most offensive manner.”

“This made it unpleasant at times, even in battle, for those around him to approach him even with information.”

“In spite of this defect he was a most valuable officer and deserves a high place in the annals of his country.”⁴⁸

Notwithstanding Grant’s qualified endorsement, George G. Meade is not portrayed as a great hero in the annals of US history, but rather is downplayed in comparison to his military colleagues of the period. With regard to recognition for the victory over Lee at the crucial Battle of Gettysburg, Meade often takes a back seat to subordinate officers such as Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock. More ironic

is the attention and idolization showered on his defeated opponent, Gen. Robert E. Lee.⁴⁹

When Meade was progressing through the ranks as a brigade, division and corps commander, he took the measure of his superiors and often found their personal behavior and decision making less than satisfactory. Upon his rise to the position of army commander, he discovered the strategy and tactics that he defined readily as a subordinate officer were more difficult to delineate, and infinitely more problematic to implement.

Perhaps General Meade’s proudest moment in his career as an army officer was when he realized that a great victory over a previously formidable enemy army was won at Gettysburg. A few months later, he reflected in his final report of the battle, “I will only add my tribute to the heroic bravery of the whole army, officers and men, which under the blessing of Divine Providence, enable a crowning victory to be obtained, which I feel confident the country will never cease to bear in grateful remembrance.”

Instead, Meade’s name and deeds have largely been relegated to historical limbo. There is little mystery why this transpired. As important as Meade’s victory over Lee at Gettysburg was, it became evident that he did not have a good grasp of the political realities facing the North in mid-1863 through early 1864. Time had become of the essence, and public support for the war was steadily waning given the mounting casualties with no end in sight.

More decisive victories were required to stem growing public disenchantment. Given Lee’s escape at Williamsport without further harm to his army and no consequential engagements over the succeeding months, Lincoln became intent on finding a solution. This resulted in his appointment of Grant, who had already captured two Rebel armies and routed a third, to the position of army general-in-chief. Grant’s decision to accompany the Army of the Potomac in the field led to an eclipse of Meade as a critical factor in the equation. Consequent-

47 Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2002), 209.

48 E.B. Long, ed., *The Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Da Capo Press), 1982, 581.

49 See, for example, Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

ly, Meade was overshadowed, and faded out of the limelight of history.⁵⁰

Commentators have struggled placing Meade's legacy in perspective. Although it is acknowledged that he deserves admiration for his performance at Gettysburg, as one historian noted, "... it should have been apparent to him that if he was to challenge Lee's retreat ... he dared not waste a moment. He must block or delay Lee's crossing of South Mountain, and he must reach the Potomac no later than the enemy if he was to have a favorable chance of bringing him to battle." The implication was that Meade missed a viable opportunity to do further damage to Lee's army.⁵¹

In later years, an officer who served under Meade at Gettysburg had a commendable view of the situation, "The Gettysburg campaign was ... timely, admirably designed, energetically executed, and brought to a close with consummate military skill." Meade would have appreciated this assessment. Yet, history has been a more demanding arbiter of his performance. Had he been aggressive and put into practice his earlier candid critique of Generals McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker, his reputation

as an army commander would arguably have been enhanced.⁵²

In closing, it should be noted, while Meade may be overshadowed by other generals historically, he is by no means forgotten. An organization known as The General Meade Society conducts tours of Meade-related sites in his hometown of Philadelphia; sponsors seminars on Meade's life, services and career; has adopted the Meade Monument and HQ site at Gettysburg, and performs an annual birthday commemoration at his gravesite in Philadelphia's historic Laurel Hill Cemetery. This group has as its mission "to promote the distinguished general," and keep his memory alive.⁵³

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⁵⁰ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vol. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1938), 2–535.

⁵¹ Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 475.

⁵² Capt. Charles Francis Adams, 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, speaking at a commemoration of Robert E. Lee's centennial in Lexington, Virginia on January 19, 1907. Quoted in Glenn Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg* (Konecky & Konecky, Old Saybrook, CT, no date), 395.

⁵³ See <https://www.facebook.com/The-General-Meade-Society-of-Philadelphia-175046292538630/about/> (accessed December 19, 2016).