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Thomas J. Ryan, Richard R. Schaus

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“Our Task Is Not Yet Accomplished”

Meade’s Decision Making after Victory at Gettysburg, July 4, 1863

THOMAS J. RYAN AND RICHARD R. SCHAUS

In a lost battle the power of an Army is broken, the moral to a greater degree than the physical. A second battle unless fresh favorable circumstances come into play, would lead to a complete defeat, perhaps, to destruction.

—Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, 359

The three-day battle at Gettysburg had ended, and a fateful aftermath was about to begin! Having conferred with his corps commanders the previous evening, with a heavy heart, Gen. Robert E. Lee issued general orders stating, “The army will vacate its position this evening. . . . The commanding general earnestly exhorts each corps commander to see that every officer exerts the utmost vigilance, steadiness, and boldness during the whole march.”¹

Following his devastating defeat on the battlefield, in a reversal of fortune, Lee found himself limited to only two feasible escape routes from Gettysburg—the Chambersburg Pike and Hagerstown (Fairfield) Road. Meade had faced a similar situation on the previous day three when only the Taneytown Road and the Baltimore Pike were potential escape routes for the Union army if misfortune had befallen it. Lt. Gen. A. P. Hill’s corps was to commence the movement, followed by Lt. Gen. James Longstreet’s corps, and Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell’s corps bringing up the rear. Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart’s cavalry received the assignment to proceed and follow the army, while guarding its right and left flanks as well as the rear.²

¹ OR, 27.2:311.

² Although, theoretically, the Mummasburg Road was also available to Lee’s army, it ran in a northwesterly direction, and would have taken it away from the Potomac River crossing points.

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

It is clear from these instructions to Stuart that Lee expected the greatest threat from the Union Army of the Potomac to be against the left and rear of his army, since that is where he assigned the bulk of the cavalry. He expected Union commander Maj. Gen. George G. Meade to move south, and follow

his army on a parallel route southwestward toward the Potomac River. Lee was aware that Meade would be limited in his options, since the defense of Washington had to be factored into his deployment. In fact, on taking command of the Army of the Potomac, Meade's orders from Halleck assigned him a dual mission as "the covering army of Washington as well as the army of operation against the invading forces of the rebels."³

Lee decided to send a lengthy wagon train toward the Potomac under the direction and care of Brig. Gen. John Imboden and his roughneck cavalry brigade of about 1,300 men. Included were assorted vehicles carrying thousands of wounded troops, as well as quartermaster, subsistence, and ordnance wagons. The train began its miserable journey in late afternoon.⁴

Lee planned for his army to travel a different route in order to cross the Potomac at Williamsport and at Falling Waters, located about four miles to the south. He had left a pontoon bridge at the latter place where part of his army crossed the river on the way north. However, Col. Andrew T. McReynolds, 1st New York Cavalry, notified Maj. Gen. William French at Frederick, Maryland, on July 3 that the Rebel force in the vicinity of Williamsport is small, and a cavalry force of 150 men could destroy the pontoon bridge at that place, "the only reliance of the Rebels for a retreat for their infantry, artillery and wagons in that direction."⁵ As a result, French sent a cavalry detachment of some 300 men from several units under Maj. Shadrack Foley, 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry, who moved toward Falling Waters and destroyed the bridge. According to French, he ordered these actions once he heard the cannon fire at Gettysburg on July 3, in order to restrict Lee's ability to retreat back to

Virginia following the battle. If true, this was an uncharacteristic and alert decision on the part of a general who had a reputation for being cautious and slow to react.

In order to arrive safely on the other side of the river without significant damage to his forces, Lee needed to conduct a vigilant and orderly retreat toward the Potomac. *Savannah Republican* correspondent Peter Wellington Alexander, who signed as P. W. A., wrote a dispatch to his newspaper summing up the situation on this Fourth of July: "Today all has been quiet along the lines. Gen. Lee has endeavored to provoke the enemy to make an assault upon his position, by throwing his skirmishers forward; but Gen. Meade, who has displayed much skill and judgement, is too well aware of the strength of his own position and the madness of attacking Lee."⁶ The reporter then ventured into the precarious waters of assessing Lee's command performance on July 3. He believed it would have been better if the attack had been delayed until the next day, allowing time for a careful reconnaissance of the ground. He thought this would have enabled Lee to get his army into proper position, given his troops time to rest and prepare rations, and insured a "systematic combined and simultaneous attack from all part of his lines."⁷ A number of Lee's officers, especially Longstreet who reluctantly accepted command of the assault force on July 3, likely would have agreed with P. W. A.'s assessment—as would have the officials in Richmond once this dispatch was published (which did not take place until July 20).

Criticism of Meade's generalship on the third day of the battle emanated from Col. Edward Porter Alexander, a perceptive artillery officer in Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's corps, who conjectured Meade made a colossal mistake by not organizing a counterattack as soon as the Confederate assault had been repulsed. He compared Meade's failure to do so to Gen. George McClellan's similar failure to attack Lee's army at Sharpsburg in September 1862. Alexander contended that their ammunition was so low and their diminished forces so unwisely

³ OR, 27:1:61.

⁴ OR, 27:1:966, 985; Imboden, "The Confederate Retreat from Gettysburg," *BC&L*, 3: 420–23. Lee stated that Imboden's brigade had about 1,300 men. See OR, 27:3:866. Another source places the number between 1,300 and 1,400. Steve French, *Imboden's Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign* (Berkeley Springs, WV, 2008), 10.

⁵ Col. Andrew T. McReynolds, 1st New York Cavalry, Commanding Cavalry Brigade to Headquarters, Cavalry Brigade, French's Corps, Army of the Potomac, Frederick, MD, July 3, 1863. Contained in Jas. A. Stevenson, *A History of the First Volunteer Cavalry of the War, First New York (Lincoln) Cavalry* (Harrisburg, PA, 1879), 201–02. French also sent Maj. H. A. Cole with another cavalry detachment further south to Harper's Ferry to destroy trestle-work on each side of the railroad bridge as well as the nearby bridge over the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, because the enemy had floored the railroad bridge, and was crossing the river in small detachments. French's post-action report, OR, 27:1:488–89; French to Halleck, July 4, 1863, III, 524.

⁶ William B. Styple, ed., *Writing & Fighting the Confederate War: The Letters of Peter Wellington Alexander, Confederate War Correspondent*, (Kearny, NJ), 165.

⁷ Styple, *Writing & Fighting*, 165; Gen. James Longstreet CSA, *From Manassas to Appomattox* (New York, 1994), 426. Because of the difficulty in sending dispatches from the battlefield over long distances, publication of Alexander's dispatch did not take place until July 20, 1863.

Col. (later general) Edward Porter Alexander. Wikipedia Commons.

dispersed along an extended line that an advance by a fresh corps, such as the Sixth Corps, could have cut Lee's army in two. He concluded that Meade should at least have considered he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by attacking their position.⁸

Meade, instead of launching a counteroffensive on July 3 after the failure of the Rebel frontal attack, feared Lee would venture another assault on Union lines. While maintaining his army's defensive posture, the commanding general, according to George Jr., his son and member of his staff, "rode over to Cemetery Hill to see the state of affairs." Upon his return from Cemetery Hill, Meade rode along Cemetery Ridge southward toward the Round Tops. This turned into what amounted to a victory lap given the unusual spectacle of an Army of the Potomac commander riding past the troops following a successful encounter with archenemy

⁸ General Edward Porter Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 432.

Gen. Robert E. Lee. It generated an outburst of cheering and huzzahs from the long-suffering Union soldiers all along the line loud enough to catch the attention of General Lee on the other side of the field, who wondered whether it might signal a counterattack. The demonstration was crowned with a rendition of "Hail to the Chief" from a band on Little Round Top as Meade approached the southern end of the field. For some observers, this unique scene manifested presidential connotations for the victorious leader.⁹

The reporter P. W. A. noted Lee put his army in motion that evening, but "No [enemy] pursuit has been attempted, or any demonstration made by either party." Longstreet recalled in his memoirs, "Orders for retreat were issued before noon of the 4th, and trains of wounded and other impedimenta were put in motion by the Chambersburg and Fairfield routes, the army to march after night by the latter,—the Second Corps as rear-guard, the First to follow the Third and push on to secure the crossing of the Potomac at Williamsport and Falling Waters."¹⁰

The Town Awakens Joyfully!

According to nineteen-year-old resident Daniel Skelly, around midnight, civilians in Gettysburg heard the commotion of the initial Confederate withdrawal from the town. Officers ordered troops bivouacked on the streets to get up quietly and fall back. By 4:00 a.m., soldiers in blue uniforms came marching down the streets with "the fife drum corps playing, the glorious Stars and Stripes fluttering at the head of the lines." Rebel soldiers left behind were quickly gathered up and marched to the rear. The departing Confederate troops threw up breastworks on the outskirts of town "to protect the retreat of their army."¹¹

Michael Jacobs, a professor at Pennsylvania (now Gettysburg) College and Gettysburg resident, noted that by 3:00 a.m. all the Rebel troops had been

⁹ Meade, *Life and Letters*, II, 109; Lt. Frank Haskell, *Gettysburg* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 229–30; Joseph Orton Kerbey, *The Boy Spy* (New York: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1889), 544; E. Porter Alexander, "The Great Charge and Artillery Fighting at Gettysburg," Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, ed., *Retreat from Gettysburg: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 3 vols., (New York: Yoseloff, 1956), vol.3, 367.

¹⁰ Styple, ed., *Writing & Fighting the Confederate War*, 165

¹¹ Daniel A. Skelly, "A Boy's Experience During the Battle of Gettysburg," http://civilwarsources.blogspot.com/2008/01/daniel-skelly-boys-experiences-during_06.html, accessed April 28, 2017.

withdrawn from the town, and placed in the rear of Seminary Ridge. He elaborated there was sufficient evidence that Lee's retreat began soon after dark on July 3, and the Rebels were hurrying their wounded, stores, ammunition, and wagon trains forward all night and all day on July 4 by the two roads leading to the Cumberland Valley; the one by the Chambersburg Pike, as far as Greenwood and then toward Waynesboro; and the other directly toward Waynesboro and Hagerstown. Jacobs's observation was Lee's escape had become a military necessity, and virtually the only Rebels left in the area were "multitudes of stragglers," and a larger number of wounded which were literally emptied out of wagons into farmhouses and barns as a result of the Rebel's hasty retreat.¹²

At 3:45 a.m., a twelve-man detachment of the 17th Connecticut, First Division, Eleventh Corps, under orders from Brig. Gen. Adelbert Ames, set out in a skirmish line into the meadows at the foot of East Cemetery Hill moving toward the town "feeling for the enemy." With considerable apprehension, considering the deadly work of Rebel sharpshooters, the men from the Nutmeg state moved ahead into fog rising from the damp low terrain. Realizing the hard-fighting Louisiana Tigers and Hoke's brigade (under Col. Isaac E. Avery) of Ewell's Corps had occupied this area, they advanced under strict silence and communicated by hand signals. Upon reaching the line the Rebels previously held about a half mile from town, there was no sign of the enemy except "long grass which had been trampled flat, or the pieces of cracker, an empty canteen and all the refuse left by a line which had been sleeping on its arms." As the fog began to lift, a church cupola came into view which they recognized having seen in the previous two days. Spotting an officer waving his hat, the detail quickened their pace and soon learned from Union troops in Gettysburg that "General Lee had been retreating since 3 o'clock in the morning."¹³

The 4th Pennsylvania Cavalry also entered the town, and confirmed that the only Rebels still there were stragglers and those who had been wounded.

The others "were in full retreat towards . . . the sacred soil of Virginia."¹⁴ The 1st New Jersey Cavalry enjoyed a brief period of repose on the 4th after the arduous three-day battle, but later in the day was back in the saddle "following up the retreating columns of the enemy."¹⁵ The 1st Maine Cavalry celebrated the 4th of July by "reconnoitering and learning that the enemy had drawn back the left flank."¹⁶

A High Price to Pay

Both sides were licking their wounds given the toll of the three-day cataclysm that left nearly 8,000 Union and Confederate dead and more than 27,000 wounded. Elbert Corbin of the 1st New York Light Artillery, Battery B wrote a letter home from the Union Second Corps hospital where he was caring for wounded officer Lt. Albert Shelden. He lamented that ten of his comrades were killed and nineteen wounded during the fighting, and placed the onus on battery commander Capt. James McK. Rorty who "placed the guns in such an exposed position." Also, at a house in Gettysburg that served as the First Louisiana Brigade hospital, Capt. John Parsons, 149th Pennsylvania, was tending his brigade commander, Col. Roy Stone, who was wounded and captured on July 1. Parsons noted the attitude of the Rebels, who had been certain of winning the battle and marching "to Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York," had changed from their high spirits on the evening of July 1. They mellowed after the fight at East Cemetery Hill on July 2, and when news of the failure of the grand assaults of July 3 on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge worked its way through the hospital, the prevailing attitude turned to depression. Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain whose 20th Maine Regiment heroically defended Little Round Top on July 2, spent the morning conducting a reconnaissance of the battlefield, and witnessed a "scene of insupportable horror." Although told to rest and be ready to move the next day, "there was neither removal nor rest for us, till

¹² M. Jacobs, *Notes on the Rebel Invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania and the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2nd, and 3rd 1863* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864), 45–46.

¹³ *Gettysburg Compiler*, September 23, 1896. The headline reads, "Untold history recited at a meeting of the regiment in Bridgeport, Conn."

¹⁴ Capt. William Hyndman, *History of a Cavalry Company: A Complete Record of Company "A", 4th Penna Cavalry* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers Co., 1870), 106.

¹⁵ Henry R. Pyne, *Ride to War: the History of the First New Jersey Cavalry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 133–34.

¹⁶ Edward P. Tobie, *History of the First Maine Cavalry, 1861–1865* (Boston: Press of Emery & Hughes, 1887), 180.

we had gone up the [Little] Round Top slopes to bid farewell to our dead.”¹⁷

Over in the Confederate sector of the battlefield and surrounding area, the scene was one of pure horror. A Union soldier described the Confederate dead sprawled along Cemetery Ridge: “No words can depict the ghastly picture . . . the men lay in heaps, the wounded wriggling and groaning under the weight of the dead among whom they were entangled. . . . I could not long endure the gory, ghastly spectacle. I found my head reeling, the tears flowing and my stomach sick at the sight. For months the specter haunted my dreams.”¹⁸

Members of the 14th Connecticut Regiment, located with the remainder of the Second Corps on the northern end of Cemetery Ridge, were eyewitnesses to the gruesome aftermath at Gettysburg: “On awakening on the morning of July 4th . . . rain was very severe through the day which must have been trying to the great number of Confederate wounded who lay directly in front of the regiment, but too far out toward their skirmish line to enable the men to give them any relief.” An event served to alleviate the otherwise ghastly scene as shots were heard from the picket lines, causing the men of the 14th to prepare for action. Several volleys were fired; but, when morning came, it was learned that a white cow had run across the field and caused the trouble. The regimental historian noted this was the last foe they met on the field of Gettysburg.¹⁹

At the southern end of the field, the 118th Pennsylvania Regiment awoke in the morning to sunlight “as if in joyous commemoration of the old freedom and in bright recognition of the nation’s new birth of liberty.” The mood soon changed when, about ten o’clock, the brigade moved out to feel and develop the enemy and came across “scenes of blood and carnage.” The dead were strewn about in all shapes and contortions. The progress of the advance was impeded by the effort to avoid

stepping on the bodies of the enemy.²⁰ A newspaper summed up the situation of the more than 27,000 Union and Confederate wounded, noting several thousands are lying with amputated limbs and every conceivable wound in tents, on the fields, in the woods, in stables and barns, and some without cover or shelter.²¹

As Kathleen Georg Harrison described the situation, this “Vast Sea of Misery” would turn Gettysburg and surrounding communities into one gigantic hospital that required “hundreds of thousands of acts of individual kindness, of bravery and courage, of charity and love, faithfulness and patriotism. It contrasts markedly with the story of the battle.” This nightmare would continue for the better part of five months into November, when President Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg to make “a few appropriate remarks” for the dedication of the National Cemetery—the permanent resting place of thousands of Union soldiers who “gave the ‘last full measure of devotion’ on the battlefield.”²²

Defense or Offense?

An issue that received little attention at the time later surfaced during a congressional hearing about the Gettysburg campaign. It dealt with whether the Army of the Potomac should have counterattacked following the defeat of the Confederate assault on the Union lines on July 3. Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, Union commander of the sector where the Rebel attack was made, testified on March 22, 1864: “I think it was probably an unfortunate thing that I was wounded at the time I was, and equally unfortunate that General Gibbon was also wounded, because the absence of a prominent commander, who knew the circumstances thoroughly, at such a moment as that, was a great disadvantage. I think that our lines should have advanced immediately, and I believe we should have won a great victory. I was very confident that the advance would be made. General Meade told me before the fight that if the enemy attacked me

17 John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 2005), 125, 260; R. L. Murray, *Letters From Gettysburg: New York Soldiers’ Correspondences from the Battlefield* (Wolcott, NY: Benedum Books, 2006), 79–80; *Gettysburg Compiler*, July 5, 1892 cited in Scott L. Mingus, Sr., *The Louisiana Tigers in the Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 184, 196; Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, “Bayonet! Forward,” *My Civil War Reminiscences* (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 36.

18 Gregory A. Coco, *Gettysburg: The Aftermath of a Battle, A Strange and Blighted Land* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1995), x.

19 Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Connecticut Infantry Regiment* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906), 167.

20 *History of the Corn Exchange Regiment, 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia, J. L. Smith, 1888), 261.

21 Quoted in Page, *History of the Fourteenth Connecticut Infantry Regiment*, 167; Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses*, 125, 260.

22 Kathleen Georg Harrison wrote the Foreword to Gregory A. Coco, *A Vast Sea of Misery: A History and Guide to the Union and Confederate Field Hospitals at Gettysburg, July 1-November 20, 1863* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1988), vii; Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 25, 261.

he intended to put the 5th and 6th corps on the enemy's flank."²³

In effect, Hancock, a trusted and loyal subordinate, was airing a concern about Meade's command decisions. It appeared to be an honest admission of disappointment in his commander's missed opportunity to win a great victory and bring an end to the war. He elaborated: "I, therefore, when I was wounded and lying down in my ambulance and about leaving the field, dictated a note to General Meade, and told him if he would put in the 5th and 6th corps I believed he would win a great victory. I asked him afterwards, when I returned to the army, what he had done in the premises. He said he had ordered the movement, but the troops were slow in collecting, and moved so slowly that nothing was done before night."

Maj. Thomas Chamberlain, 150th Pennsylvania Regiment, expressed a similar view as Hancock's on this subject. Wounded on July 1 and left in possession of the enemy, he witnessed the change in mood the Rebels exhibited following repulse of Pickett's ill-fated attack on July 3. It transformed from confident and exultant to such alarm and confusion that bedlam reigned; and, in panic, Lee's troops rushed to construct breastworks for protection against an anticipated counterattack. In Chamberlain's judgment, if a column of the least engaged Union troops pushed forward vigorously to conduct an attack, the resistance would have been short-lived and the Rebel lines would have melted away in retreat toward the Potomac. While conceding Meade probably knew best under the circumstances, he foresaw regret among many that no effort was made to deliver a crushing blow to Lee's army. Confederate Col. James P. Simms of Longstreet's corps echoed Chamberlain's comments, "There was much confusion in our army so far as my observation extended, and I think we would have made but feeble resistance, if [the Union forces] had pressed on, on the evening of the 3d."²⁴

Meade later testified to the congressional committee investigating the battle at Gettysburg

that he intended to advance on his left after the repulse of Pickett's Charge on July 3, but a number of factors caused him to abandon the effort, including, "The great length of the line, and the time required to carry these orders out to the front, and the movement subsequently made, before the report given to me of the condition of the forces in the front and left, caused it to be so late in the evening as to induce me to abandon the assault which I had contemplated." This was an indication that Meade had spent little, if any, time pre-planning a potential counterattack in light of Hancock's assertions, and of his predisposition as army commander to remain on the defensive in combat. In consideration of taking the offensive, he hesitated to act on his own initiative, and preferred to rely on advice and direction from subordinates. In part, this resulted from his recent appointment to command, but a pattern was established for the future. Maj. James C. Biddle, a member of Meade's staff, asserted "Meade's impulse was to attack at once" following repulse of Pickett's Charge; and rationalized his decision not to because, after consultation with the corps commanders, "he abstained from ordering an assault until he could more fully reconnoiter the enemy's position."²⁵

Although Meade had informed General in Chief Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck in Washington the previous evening that there were indications Lee might be withdrawing from his positions, thus far he was not convinced that the Confederate army was in retreat. Early in the day, Meade adopted a guarded approach toward pursuing the enemy. Casting doubt that Lee was in fact retreating was a report from Brig. Gen. Francis C. Barlow, the commander First Division, Eleventh Corps, who sent word from inside the town of Gettysburg that he believed the enemy was not in retreat. Barlow had been wounded on July 1, captured, and then left behind when the Rebels withdrew. Although Barlow provided no evidence for his supposition, Meade attached credence to it. Subsequent events demonstrated Barlow's perception of Lee's movements was mistaken. His captors may have fed him misinformation about their intentions,

²³ Bill Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak: The Meade Hearings on the Battle of Gettysburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 218.

²⁴ Thomas Chamberlain, *History of the One Hundred Fiftieth Pennsylvania Regiment* (Philadelphia: F. McManus Jr. & Co, 1905), 151–52. Col. Simms is quoted in A. Doubleday, *Campaigns of the Civil War: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2002), 207.

²⁵ Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak*, 218; James C. Biddle, "General Meade at Gettysburg," *The Annals of the Civil War* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1994), 216.

a common practice for the Rebels. In any event, it bolstered Meade's reluctance to pursue Lee's army, and lent credibility to his wait-and-see approach. At 6:00 a.m., Meade's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield sent a message to newly-appointed First Corps commander Maj. Gen. John Newton: "General Barlow, in town, sends word that he believes the movement of the enemy to be a mere feint . . . [Gen. Meade] thinks that Barlow's opportunities for judging are good. The general only desires to know where the enemy are, and *not by any means to bring on an action.*"²⁶

While Lee was engrossed in planning and implementing a secure withdrawal of his defeated army, Meade, whose headquarters had moved to the Baltimore Pike near Rock Creek, decided to rest and resupply his forces and take time to consider his options. Having received notification from the Sixth Corps signal station that Lee's army might be withdrawing, Meade ordered elements of the Fifth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Corps to reconnoiter enemy positions on the battlefield. Meade also ordered chief engineer, Maj. Gen. Gouverneur Warren, to pinpoint Lee's location and movements, and Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick to have his Sixth Corps ready at 4:30 a.m. the next day to support Warren's reconnaissance. All the signal stations, meanwhile, remained on watch on the battlefield and in town.²⁷

Lee's Retrograde Movement

I shall require some time to get up supplies, ammunition, etc., rest the army, worn out by long marches and three days' hard fighting.

—Maj. Gen. George G. Meade²⁸

At 6:45 a.m., 1st Lt. J. Calvin Wiggins and 1st Lt. Norman Henry Camp at the Union Sixth Corps signal station, on Little Round Top, provided additional evidence Lee was retiring from the field. Enemy wagon trains were moving toward Millerstown on the route leading from Gettysburg to the Fairfield Road. To cover the withdrawal, the enemy had a heavy line of skirmishers, "extending

from our extreme left to the brick house [probably the Sherfy house] on our right."²⁹

Fifteen minutes later, Meade notified Halleck he had deployed pickets to "ascertain the nature and extent of the enemy's movement." He thought his information was insufficient to determine whether Lee was planning to "retreat or maneuver for other purposes."³⁰ While this activity was taking place on both sides of the field at Gettysburg, back in Washington, a thankful President Lincoln issued a press release for public consumption: "The President announces to the country that news from the Army of the Potomac, up to 10 p.m. of the 3rd, is such as to cover that Army with the highest honor, to promise a great success to the cause of the Union, and to claim the condolence of all for the many gallant fallen." Reflecting a mood of elation after repeated disappointments the past two years concerning the performance of this army on the battlefield, Lincoln praised God, because, "He whose will, not ours, should ever be done, be everywhere remembered and revered with profoundest gratitude." Old Abe had publicly breathed a sigh of relief."³¹

This good news about the outcome at Gettysburg was excellent timing considering ongoing preparations at the White House to commemorate the country's eighty-seventh birthday. Assistant presidential secretary William Osborn Stoddard coordinated celebratory activities in conjunction with Brig. Gen. John Henry Martindale, military governor of the District of Columbia. Martindale arranged for infantry, cavalry, and artillery units that were in the city to participate in the ceremonies on the White House grounds before proceeding up river as reinforcements for Meade's army.³²

Late in the morning, Halleck informed Brig. Gen. Benjamin F. Kelley in Clarksburg, West Virginia, that captured dispatches from Jefferson Davis show that the country between Lee's army and Richmond is entirely stripped of troops, and that Brig. Gen. E. Scammon's planned expedition aimed at cutting Lee's vital supply line, the Virginia Central Railroad, should move ahead expeditiously. Also, Halleck instructed Kelley to concentrate forc-

²⁶ OR, 27:1:75; Butterfield to Newton, July 4, 1863, III, 513 (emphasis added); Meade, *The Life and Letters*, 2:118; Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 470.

²⁷ OR, 27:3:514; Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2:115; OR, 27:1:78; III, 517; Brown, *The Signal Corps*, 739, 896.

²⁸ OR, 27:1:78. Extracts from two messages sent at 7:00 a.m. and 12 noon.

²⁹ OR, 27:3:514; Brown, *The Signal Corps*, 364–65, 896.

³⁰ OR, 27:1:78.

³¹ OR, 27:3:515; Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VI, 314.

³² William O. Stoddard, *Inside the White House at War Times* (New York, NY: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1890), 206–07.

July 4, 1863. At 6:45 a.m., the Union Sixth Corps signal station on Little Round Top, reported enemy wagon trains (probably Longstreet's artillery wagons) moving toward Millerstown on the route leading from Gettysburg to the Fairfield Road. Perhaps to cover the withdrawal, the enemy had a heavy line of skirmishers extending from "our extreme left to the brick house (probably the Sherfy house) on our right." This was an early indication that Lee's army may have begun retiring from the field.

The Signal Corps station on Little Round Top reports wagons moving away from the Confederate lines at 6:45 a.m. on July 4. Phil Laino.

es at Hancock, Maryland, to be “in a position to attack Lee’s flanks, should he be compelled to recross the Potomac.” The authorities in Washington were marshalling forces to support what they anticipated would be the Army of the Potomac’s pursuit and further damage or destruction of Lee’s army.³³

Finding little time to rest, Meade continued to tap his energy reserves. He had observed the Rebels as they reformed their lines west of Gettysburg, withdrew their skirmishers, and left their dead and wounded on the field. Given available information, Meade should have concluded he had at least a 20,000-troop advantage over Lee—with the potential for substantial reinforcements from other Union sectors. This was supported by Maj. Gen. Darius Couch, Department of the Susquehanna commander in Harrisburg, who sent word that Judge Francis M. Kimmell, a knowledgeable citizen who arrived from Chambersburg, reported Lee had concentrated all his force at Gettysburg amounting to 75,000, including 12,000 cavalry. This was a reasonable estimate supported by a previous

³³ OR, 27:3:528. A message sent on July 22, 1863, from T. B. A. David to Col. Anson Stager, Superintendent of the US Military Telegraph Corps, reported, “Party sent by General Scammon to cut the Virginia [Central] Railroad was compelled to fall back . . .” OR, 27:3:750. For Jefferson Davis’ captured dispatches, see OR, 27:1:75–77.

Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck. National Archives and Records Administration.

eyewitness report Thomas McCammon delivered to Meade on June 28. It stated reliable citizens of Hagerstown painstakingly counted the Rebel army as it marched through town, and “could not make them over 80,000.”³⁴

Nonetheless, despite at the time acknowledging to Halleck that the figures from Hagerstown “were confirmed by information gathered from various sources regarded as reliable,” (i.e., the analysis of Meade’s intelligence staff, the Bureau of Military Information) and reconfirmed by Judge Kim-

mell’s report from Chambersburg and Couch’s telegraph of that day, Meade now embraced the unsubstantiated claim that Lee’s army was stronger than his. In a July 1 message to Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, Meade had placed Lee’s strength at 92,000 infantry and 6,000 to 8,000 cavalry without citing a source or evidence to support these numbers. By mentally inflating the enemy’s strength, Meade correspondingly deflated his operational tenacity.³⁵

³⁴ OR, 27:1:65, 78; OR, 27:3:525. While the troop advantage was in favor of Meade and continued to grow during the retreat, some Union generals believed the reverse to be true. A. Wilson Greene, “From Gettysburg to Falling Waters: Meade’s Pursuit of Lee,” in Gary W. Gallagher (ed.), *The Third Day at Gettysburg and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 176, 200. They undoubtedly were reflecting the mindset of their commanding general.

³⁵ OR, 27:3:518, 525; OR, 27:1:65; Sharpe to Butterfield, National Archives Record Group 393, [July 3, 1863]; OR, 27:1:65 [July 4, 1863].

Based on what was already known about the Army of Northern Virginia prior to the Gettysburg campaign, Meade should have been confident in the information received from his intelligence staff. A few days prior to the battle at Chancellorsville, Virginia, in early May, the Bureau of Military Information (BMI) prepared an order of battle for the Army of Northern Virginia with a total of 61,800 men—including infantry, artillery, and cavalry. According to Halleck, after his defeat at Chancellorsville, Hooker never estimated Lee's army to be more than 70,000, while "Others who have had the best opportunities of observation [probably a reference to the BMI], do not think they have exceeded 60,000." Army of the Potomac Provost Marshal General (PMG) Marsena Patrick, who was the administrative head of the BMI, noted in his diary after the battle of Chancellorsville the Union army was "double the enemy in number." For the record, an even more authoritative voice on this subject was Walter H. Taylor, Lee's adjutant general, who placed the Confederate army's strength at Chancellorsville to be 57,000.³⁶

Lee suffered extensive losses at Chancellorsville; but, the return of two of Longstreet's divisions and the addition of other units reinforced his army prior to the Gettysburg campaign. As mentioned, the Union observers in Hagerstown, Maryland, along the route of Lee's march northward, counted his troops as they marched through the town and reported to Meade on June 28 they "could not make them over 80,000."³⁷

While estimating an army's strength of more than 150 years ago is an inexact science, examination of existing records permits reasonably accurate conclusions. For example, respected analysts John Busey and David Martin list Army of Northern Virginia strength for June 30, 1863, to be 80,202, and calculates actual engaged numbers during the three-day battle at Gettysburg to be 71,699. Taylor, Lee's Assistant Adjutant General, as he had done at Chancellorsville, placed the army's strength in more realistic focus stating that at Gettysburg it totaled 67,000 to 68,000 men. In other words, other factors that may not be apparent tend to skew the numbers; and Civil War armies were not as strong as modern-

day calculation tends to show. Soldiers had a mind of their own, and were not always where they were supposed to be. To his chagrin, General Lee discovered this all too well when he later informed President Jefferson Davis that upwards of 5,000 of his otherwise healthy men evidently avoided combat at Gettysburg; and, on their own, straggled out the Chambersburg Road on July 4 where the next day Union cavalry patrolling that area reported "the wholesale capture of prisoners . . . [who] were endeavoring to make their way into the mountains."³⁸

"We Have Scotch'd the Snake, Not Kill'd It . . ."³⁹

Given the information available through a variety of sources about the condition of Lee's army, Meade could well have responded like a shark with blood in the water and gone on the offensive. There is no evidence, however, Meade sought the advice of PMG Patrick, Col. Sharpe and the BMI, or General in Chief Halleck about the strength of the enemy's forces. Rather than seizing the moment, he adopted a cautious approach and remained in position, rested his army, and assessed its condition. Upon learning that Meade did not intend to pursue Lee immediately, Brig. Gen. Hermann Haupt of the Union Military Railway Department, who was overseeing the repair of the railroads and bridges in the vicinity of Gettysburg, fired off a message to Halleck from Oxford seven miles east of Gettysburg, "I fear that while Meade rests to refresh his men and collect supplies, Lee will be off so far that he cannot intercept him. A good force on the line of the Potomac to prevent Lee from crossing would, I think, insure his destruction."⁴⁰

While Lee was engrossed in planning and implementing a secure withdrawal of his defeated army, Meade informed his corps commanders, "The intention of the major-general commanding is not to make any present move, but to refit and

³⁶ Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union*, 369 (facing page).

³⁷ OR, 27:1:65.

³⁸ John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 2005), 169. Busey and Martin base their estimates in part on contemporary muster rolls which serve to add credibility to these figures; Walter H. Taylor, *General Lee, His Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1865* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 211; OR, 27:3:582, 1048; OR, 27:3:977, 981-82.

³⁹ *The Works of William Shakespeare* (Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service, 1944), 1112. This quote serves as a simile for Meade's task of defeating the enemy that was only partially completed, leaving the opportunity for the enemy to recover and strike his army once again.

⁴⁰ OR, 27:3:521-523. Haupt sent this message at 11:00 a.m. on July 4. At the time he was working to improve and restore railroads that were supporting the Army of the Potomac. Patricia L. Faust, ed., *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 351.

rest for to-day.” He decided to look to the succor of his forces, and take time deciding on a course of action against the retreating enemy. Lee had feared the worst when he withdrew from Gettysburg in the face of a victorious enemy; yet, was grateful when the “enemy offered no serious opposition.” Lt. Col. G. Moxley Sorrel, one of Longstreet’s staff officers, described the Southern army’s good fortune: “Notwithstanding our great losses of the second and third [of July], we were permitted to hold the field on the fourth [of July] by Meade’s inactivity. His army was very strong, had not suffered as had ours, and an enterprising general might seemingly have had us on the run in short order.”⁴¹

Until he could determine the meaning of Lee’s movements, Meade maintained a blocking position between the Army of Northern Virginia and the capital at Washington. He informed Halleck, “My . . . pickets are moving out to ascertain the nature and extent of the enemy’s movement. My information is not sufficient for me to decide its character yet—whether a retreat or maneuver for other purposes. . . . I shall require some time to get up supplies, ammunition, etc., rest the army, worn out by long marches and three days’ hard fighting.”⁴²

Meade instructed Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton to send Brig. Gen. Hugh Judson Kilpatrick’s Third Cavalry Division to Emmitsburg, and rendezvous there with Col. Pennock Huey’s brigade of Brig. Gen. David M. Gregg’s division. They were to proceed to the town of Monterey to the west on the top of South Mountain to destroy the wagon trains of Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell’s corps reportedly moving toward Hagerstown. Kilpatrick was also to operate on the enemy’s rear and flanks. Rev. Louis N. Boudrye, chaplain of the 5th New York Cavalry, noted that Kilpatrick gathered his brigade together to praise them for their noble deeds during the

Gettysburg campaign. He then led them toward Emmitsburg to intercept the Rebel trains, which were known to be on the retreat southward.⁴³

Around noon, Maj. Gen. Darius Couch in Harrisburg sent Meade an inaccurate report that the Rebels had fortified the passes in South Mountain in Maryland; information that was a week old. As a result, Brig. Gen. John Buford received orders while guarding the army’s supply trains at Westminster to move to his First Cavalry Division to South Mountain (Turner’s) Pass, and prevent the enemy from occupying it. Buford moved with two of his brigades, those of Col. William Gamble and Col. Thomas C. Devin, from Westminster toward Frederick, where he rendezvoused with his other brigade under the command of Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt. Hampered by the heavy rain, the 8th New York Cavalry of Gamble’s brigade traveled only four miles in the direction of Frederick before bivouacking for the night—indicating the movement was off to a sluggish start. Since Meade had subsequently instructed Maj. Gen. William French’s detached division at Frederick to seize and hold the South Mountain passes, Buford learned en route that he was to continue on to Williamsport to destroy the enemy’s trains that were known to be moving in that direction.

Meanwhile, Imboden, who was in command of the Confederate wagon train of wounded, managed to fend off attacks by detachments of Couch’s forces and citizens along the route with limited damage. Col. J. Irvin Gregg’s brigade of Brig. Gen. David M. Gregg’s division could have inflicted serious injury on the train, but pursued tentatively and avoided a full-scale confrontation with the enemy. This was another indicator of the lack of clear-cut direction from army headquarters.⁴⁴

In addition to Huey serving with Kilpatrick, the other brigades of Gregg’s division received special assignments. Col. J. Irvin Gregg’s brigade operated independently moving to Hunterstown, about

41 OR, 27:3520; Meade, *The Life and Letters*, 2:114; Taylor, *General Lee*, 212; Bell Irvin Wiley, ed., *Recollections of a Confederate Staff officer*, By Brig. Gen. G. Moxley Sorrel, C.S.A. (Jackson, TN: McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc., 1958), 164–165.

42 OR, 27:178–80, 117, 916–17, 928, 958–59, 967, 970, 977, 981, 988, 993, 998–1000, 1005–6, 1011, 1019; OR, 27:3513–14, 516–17, 530–34. Prisoner depots were in a number of locations. On July 3, a new depot was established at White Church south of Gettysburg on the Baltimore Pike near the Union First Corps hospital. David S. Sparks, *Inside Lincoln’s Army: The Diary of General Marsena Rudolph Patrick* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 267; Gregory A. Coco, *A Strange and Blighted Land—Gettysburg: The Aftermath of a Battle* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1995), 202. Meade, *The Life and Letters*, 2:118. Meade sent messages to Halleck at 7:00 a.m. and 12 noon on July 4, 1863. OR, 27:178. See also Meade’s circular sent to corps commanders. OR, 27:3520.

43 OR, 27:1593, 761, 917, 970, 988, 993; Greene, *Meade’s Pursuit of Lee*, 164; Rev. Louis N. Boudrye, *Historic Records of the Fifth New York Cavalry* (Albany, NY: S. R. Gray, 1865), 68.

44 OR, 27:1916, 928, 943; OR, 27:3515–18; Meade, *The Life and Letters* 2:113; Henry Norton, *History of the Eighth New York Cavalry* (Norwich, NY: Telegraph Printing House, 1889), 70; OR, 27:1916, 928; Imboden, “The Confederate Retreat from Gettysburg,” *B&L*, 3:425; Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 250–55.

Maj. Gen. Darius Couch. National Archives and Records Administration.

seven miles northeast of Gettysburg, to contest the enemy's cavalry pickets.

Pleasanton ordered Col. John B. McIntosh's brigade to picket the roads on the extreme left of the Union army, and to observe the movements of the enemy in that direction. Pleasanton directed his cavalry "to gain [the enemy's] rear and line of communication, and *harass and annoy him* [emphasis added] as much as possible in his retreat." Lacking specificity, these orders were unlikely to inspire a wholehearted effort to impede and inflict further damage on the Rebel army—primarily because they did not state that was the objective. What was par-

ticularly striking about these orders, especially in view of Meade's concern about lack of information, was the absence of instructions to learn the whereabouts and intentions of the enemy, and report it to headquarters immediately. Emphasizing combat over reconnaissance had been Pleasanton's *modus operandi* since the outset of the campaign; but, in this case, he evidently was passing along Meade's instructions.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ OR, 27:1:916. For background on Pleasanton, see J. David Petruzzzi, "The Fleeting Fame of Alfred Pleasanton," *America's Civil War*, March 2005, 20–28. For references to his limitations regarding intelligence gathering, see Petruzzzi, *America's Civil War*, 24.

Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton. National Archives and Records Administration.

These orders also led to the cavalry being widely dispersed rather than concentrated for action. When McIntosh moved with his brigade to Emmitsburg on July 4, he learned from the local population that Stuart had already passed through the town. He also captured a dispatch showing the location of Longstreet's and Ewell's corps in the vicinity of Fairfield. Apparently as a result of sending this information to headquarters, McIntosh later received orders to join Brig. Gen. Thomas H. Neill and his Sixth Corps brigade that Sedgwick had detached during his reconnaissance in the mountains to watch the rear guard of the enemy and send frequent reports to Meade about their activities.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, after receiving orders to reconnoiter the enemy positions, Maj. Gen. George Sykes,

⁴⁶ OR, vol. 27:1:86–87, 117–18, 678–80, 967; OR, 27:2:361, 448; Peter C. Vermilyea, "Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick and the Pursuit of Lee's Army After Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 22 (January 2000), 120.

commander of the Fifth Corps operating on the southern end of the Union line near Little Round Top, found a line of skirmishers out in front of the Rebel troops, and artillery on a slope that fell away toward the turnpike to the west. The commander of the Twelfth Corps, Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum, sent a brigade forward to the east at the far end of the Union "fishhook" line and found the enemy had retired from his immediate front.⁴⁷

Union Intelligence Operations

While the cavalry was deployed to harass the retreating enemy, Sharpe, Meade's intelligence chief, sent operatives to reconnoiter the Rebels. Chief scout, Sgt. Milton Cline along with four others, operating in typical manner, donned Confederate uniforms and set out to mix with the retreating enemy forces. James W. Greenwood, a civilian scout, received orders to reconnoiter the Sharpsburg area for Confederate activity, while another civilian scout named Browning was sent to the vicinity of Williamsport. The Signal Corps, meanwhile, continued to observe the enemy in the area of Seminary Ridge and beyond. In the late afternoon and early evening of July 4, a station in the Gettysburg Court House steeple and another on the battlefield reported continual movement of wagons and cavalry toward the Chambersburg Road and the Fairfield Road, the two main arteries of withdrawal employed by Lee.⁴⁸

Political Considerations Take Precedence

Late that afternoon, Meade, after dealing with the immediate issues of the day, took a few minutes to write out a personal note of gratitude to his victorious troops so deserving of official recognition for, as the commander phrased it, "the glorious result of the recent operations": "An enemy, *superior in numbers* [emphasis added], and flushed with the pride

⁴⁷ OR, 27:1:593, 761.

⁴⁸ Col. George H. Sharpe to Brig. Gen. Alpheus S. Williams, A.A.G., [Army of the Potomac], July 9, 10, and 11, 1863, Records of the Bureau of Military Information, Record Group 393, National Archives; OR, vol. 27:3:518, Brown, *The Signal Corps*, 365; Col. Bill Cameron, "The Signal Corps at Gettysburg Part II: Support of Meade's Pursuit," *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 4 (January 1, 1991), 101. Greenwood was a resident of Martinsburg, West Virginia who had worked with the BMI's John C. Babcock during the Antietam Campaign in 1862 while Babcock was a member of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's intelligence organization led by Allan Pinkerton, and again during Babcock's assignment in Maryland for the BMI in search of Lee's army in June 1863. Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 153, 464, 467.

July 4, 1863. In the late afternoon and early evening, Union signal stations located in the courthouse steeple in Gettysburg and on Little Round Top notified General Meade about the movement of wagons and cavalry on the Chambersburg Pike and the Fairfield Road. Stuart sent cavalry to Cashtown to guard the Rebel army's right flank during the retreat from Gettysburg.

0 Scale in Miles 5
 ♦ Signal Stations

In the late afternoon of July 4 Confederate wagon trains are seen leaving along the Chambersburg Pike.
 Phil Laino.

of a successful invasion, attempted to overcome and destroy this army. Utterly baffled and defeated, he has now withdrawn from the contest. The privations and fatigue the army has endured, and the heroic courage and gallantry it has displayed, will be matters of history, to be ever remembered.”⁴⁹

This was obviously a heartfelt and grateful message from a commander of which many in the army had little personal knowledge and experience. The Union troops were already flying high psychologically, having finally defeated an army and its commander that had whipped it repeatedly in the past—and had done so against great odds. Meade’s statement that the enemy was “superior in numbers,” however, undermined his integrity, having provided no credible evidence that Lee’s army was stronger than the Army of the Potomac. As previously discussed, available intelligence demonstrated the Union army was considerably larger than the enemy’s. Meade’s misconception would constrain his inclination to pursue and engage Lee—mimicking predecessors McClellan and Hooker in previous campaigns. As reflected in Professor Jacobs’ memoirs, this distorted thinking, grossly overstating the enemy’s strength, made its way in the army’s rumor mill. Jacobs recorded that in the battle at Gettysburg the Rebels had 90,000 men while the Union could only muster 60,000. These lop-sided numbers were a reflection of inaccurate figures incrementally skewing beyond recognition as they filtered down through the ranks to the local population from their original source—the Union commander himself.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the second part of his message to the troops had political connotations, and would come back to haunt Meade. He cautioned: “Our task is not yet accomplished, and the commanding general looks to the army for greater efforts *to drive from our soil* [emphasis added] every vestige of the presence of the invaders.”

While this may have seemed like an aggressive stance to Meade, the idea of driving the enemy from “our soil” rather than intercepting and attacking them would draw Lincoln’s attention.

⁴⁹ OR, 27:3:519.

⁵⁰ OR, 27:3:519; Jacobs, *Notes on the Rebel Invasion*, 46. McClellan repeatedly over-estimated the size of the enemy’s forces. See, Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 273–74. Hooker overestimated Lee’s army by 30,000 troops. See Sparks, *Inside Lincoln’s Army*, 261.

Alexander K. McClure. Wikipedia Commons.

This also permeated the thinking of his subordinate officers. Brig. Gen. John Geary, a division commander in Twelfth Corps, wrote to his wife that prospects were good “to drive out speedily the rebels,” and he thought in another week there will not be a rebel left in the state. Likewise, Brig. Gen. Samuel Crawford, a Fifth Corps division commander, reacted to Meade’s message with the comment that his troops ardently desire to drive the enemy from our soil. However, Col. James Barnet Fry of the Adjutant General’s staff was in the Secretary of War’s office when Lincoln read Meade’s message to the troops. Fry noticed an expression of disappointment on Lincoln’s face as his hands dropped to his knees and exclaimed, “Drive the invaders from our soil. My God! Is that all?” Meade would soon learn of the president’s misgivings about how well he understood the necessity to pursue and engage Lee before he was able to return safely to Virginia. Alexander K. McClure, a writer and political friend of Abraham Lincoln, later summed up the situation. Comparing Meade’s stance to McClellan’s following the battle of Antietam in which he claimed success for driving the enemy back into Virginia. McClure wrote that

Lincoln believed that neither general understood “the great purpose of the war.” Lincoln held that the whole country was “our soil.” Besides, the war would be better fought in the North because it diffused Southern forces, and made it difficult for them to supply their army.⁵¹

Another political concern developed when Admiral Samuel P. Lee telegraphed Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles from Fort Monroe, Virginia, about the desire of Confederate Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens, who arrived on the flag-of-truce boat, to proceed directly to Washington to meet with President Lincoln. The stated purpose was to convey a written communication from Pres. Jefferson Davis to Lincoln, and “conferring upon the subjects to which it relates . . .” Since Lincoln was at his retreat, the Soldiers’ Home, relaxing at the time, he did not learn about the inquiry immediately. This overture from Davis, coming before knowledge of Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg had reached Richmond, may have been motivated by optimism that a Lee victory in Pennsylvania could cause the proposed meeting to morph into one that addressed actual peace negotiations. News of Meade’s victory over Lee would not filter back to Davis for several days; meanwhile, authorities in Richmond were preoccupied with alarms that Union forces under Maj. Gen. John Adams Dix, Department of Virginia commander, were threatening that city.⁵²

The Confederate spy network into the North known as the “Secret Line” did not function at this time with its normal efficiency. Reportedly able to acquire newspapers in Washington and transport them to Richmond within 24 hours, and from New York within 48 hours, along a clandestine route running through Southern Maryland across the Potomac River, evidently it malfunctioned at this critical time. Definitive word about the outcome of the battle at Gettysburg appeared in the July 4 edition of the New York *Herald* stating “the victory of the Union army was complete.” But, this outcome would not be known in Richmond for several more

days. Reports sent to Richmond from the battlefield on July 4 by Southern correspondents traveling with Lee’s army were delayed because the couriers could not cross the Potomac River swollen by heavy rains.⁵³

When George Meade assumed command of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, he rapidly marshaled his forces and led them in pursuit of the enemy to do battle. He won a great victory at Gettysburg by using his strong defensive position south of the town to considerable advantage. To pursue and destroy Lee’s retreating army, however, Meade would have to switch to an offensive strategy. A few minutes before 4:00 p.m., Meade sent word to Halleck in Washington that he needed time to resupply and rest the army after the arduous march to Gettysburg and the horrendous three-day battle. When Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles learned about Meade’s decision not to pursue Lee immediately, he vented his exasperation in his diary, “Our army is waiting for supplies to come up before following [Lee’s army],—a little of the old lagging infirmity.”⁵⁴

The previous evening, given that the arduous three-day battle had ended, Meade was resting and receiving reports from his officers brought by couriers while sitting on a large flat rock just east of Taneytown Road where he had moved his headquarters to get away from the chaotic conditions and odor caused by numerous dead horses around the Lydia Leister cottage, his former location. He was considering his options and savoring the great victory his army had won on the battlefield, when a band marched over playing “Hail to the Chief.” A reporter observing the scene proclaimed, “Ah! General Meade, you’re in very great danger of being President of the United States.” This was not an idle prediction, given the general who eventually won the war would indeed become president. Another bystander chimed in, “Finish well this work so well begun, and the position you have is better and prouder than President.” Judging by the preliminary

⁵¹ OR, 27:3519, 563; William Alan Blair, *A Politician Goes to War: The Civil War Letters of John White Geary* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 98; Sandburg, *Lincoln: The War Years*, 2:344; Alexander K. McClure, “Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief,” *McClure’s Magazine*, vol. 4 (New York: J. J. Little & Co., 1895), 264.

⁵² Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 6: 314–15; Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 369.

⁵³ Chas. E. Taylor, *The Signal and Secret Service of the Confederate States* (Harmans, MD: Toomey Press, 1986), 22; *New York Herald*, July 4, 1863; J. Cutler Andrews, *The South Reports the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 316. For information on the Secret Line, see Tidwell, et. al., *Come Retribution*, 87–91.

⁵⁴ Meade to Halleck, July 4, 1863, OR, 27:1:78; Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson*, 3 volumes (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1911), 1, 357. Diary entry is for July 4, 1863. Secretary Welles’s statement reflects his frustration with Meade’s and his predecessors’ lack of aggressiveness in pursuing Lee’s army.

reaction to Meade's decision not to pursue the enemy immediately, however, the bloom of adulation was already starting to come off the rose.⁵⁵

Eleventh Corps division commander Maj. Gen. Carl Schurz placed this situation in perspective when he noted that, despite celebrations within the army over the victory at Gettysburg and the news of the fall of Vicksburg, there was a depressing realization that it was not a complete victory. Because, on this day, the enemy still stood in a strong defensive position on Seminary Ridge and we did not attack him. Schurz thought it was humiliating to contemplate that, after the repulse of Pickett's Charge the previous day, a counterattack might have brought about the sought-after complete victory. Although an admirer of Meade's character, Schurz believed he lost an opportunity by not following up his advantage in order to gain a complete victory. It was a rare opportunity "demanding instant resolution." A member of the rank and file concurred with Schurz's assessment. C. W. Bardeen, 1st Massachusetts Regiment, was happy his army finally achieved victory; yet, lamented that Meade did not act more like a victor. Rather, "He seemed as afraid [of Lee] after the battle as before."⁵⁶

Rebel Retreat in Full Motion

Continuing to observe the enemy in the area of Seminary Ridge and beyond, in the late afternoon and early evening, 1st Lt. Peter A. Taylor, the Second Corps signal officer from a station in the Court House steeple in Gettysburg, and 1st Lt. William H. Hill and 1st Lt. Isaac S. Lyon manning the Fifth Corps signal station on Little Round Top reported continual movement of wagons and cavalry toward the Chambersburg Road and the Fairfield Road. Taylor was apparently observing part of Fitz Lee and Hampton's cavalry brigades that Stuart, in response to Lee's orders, had sent to Cashtown to protect the army's right flank until it safely moved past Fairfield. These brigades were to protect the army's

"right and rear" by following it to Williamsport via the road through Greenwood.⁵⁷

Taylor concluded his report with the comment that "Dense smokes have been seen all day behind the hills in the direction of Cashtown." Samuel Pickens of the 5th Alabama provided an explanation for the smoke when he recorded in his diary that his regiment "didn't travel more than two or three miles before they were stopped due to the road being blocked by the wagon trains. There, they were drenched by a cold rain, but when it subsided they made fires and made themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances." Building fires to ward off the cold and rain was undoubtedly a common practice throughout the slowly retreating army. Maj. Eugene Blackford of the 5th Alabama added to the smoky atmosphere when he ignited hay stored inside a house that Union skirmishers had been using to fire upon the retreating Rebels.⁵⁸

At 7:15 p.m., Taylor sent another message to Meade: "A train of thirty-three wagons just passed from near Herr's tavern [on Chambersburg Road] toward the Fairfield road." Also, "Several smaller trains have been seen during the day in the same direction." The wagons near Herr's Tavern probably were part of Hill's corps that withdrew on the night of the 4th, and the ones seen during the day belonged to either Ewell or Longstreet's corps that withdrew earlier. Taylor updated Meade about the cavalry reported previously moving along the Chambersburg Road; they had "halted behind the woods north of the [Lutheran Theological] seminary" with the "head of the column resting on the Tapeworm road." This was a reference to the unimproved railroad cut that ran just to the north and parallel to the Chambersburg Road that was sometimes used as an alternate route. The cavalry was "still there at this hour; horses grazing," an indication of how slowly the retreat was progressing.⁵⁹

A few minutes later the signal officers on Little Round Top, Hill and Lyon, informed Meade, "All quiet in front. Enemy just relieved their outer pick-

55 J. Cutler Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), 427. Secretary Stanton also expressed the idea "whoever captures Lee will be president." George C. Gorham, *Life and Public Services of Edwin M. Stanton*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 99.

56 Bancroft and Dunning, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz, 1863-1869*, Vol. 3, 42; C. W. Bardeen, *A Little Fifer's War Diary* (Syracuse, NY: C. W. Bardeen, 1910), 239.

57 OR, 27:3:516; Brown, *The Signal Corps*, 365; Col. Bill Cameron, "The Signal Corps at Gettysburg Part II: Support of Meade's Pursuit," *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 4 (January 1, 1991), 101; OR, 27:2:311, 699.

58 OR, 27:3:516; Noah Andre Trudeau, ed., "5th Alabama Sharpshooters Taking Aim at Cemetery Hill," *America's Civil War* (July 2001), 52.

59 OR, vol. 27:3:516; OR, 27:2:608.

ets.” These pickets, however, were screening Lee’s retreating forces. The report continued, “for the last twenty-five minutes” there was movement out the Fairfield Road, including “a steady stream of heavy wagons, ambulances, cavalry, and what seems to be artillery, or else flying artillery, and no cavalry.” This succinct but detailed message closed with, “They move slowly and to our left.”⁶⁰

William “Grumble” Jones’s cavalry brigade was among those making their way out the Fairfield Road after having engaged in a bloody battle with elements of the 6th US Cavalry the previous day. The Eleventh Regiment of Jones’s brigade, plodding along wet from the continuous rain, tired and hungry, detached a party to acquire food at a large farm house along the route. At first the owner, an old “Dutchman,” claimed he had nothing to spare. When one of the men struck a match against the wood of his barn and threatened to burn it, the old man called his wife in a state of alarm, who said perhaps she could find a loaf of bread they had been saving for themselves. When a cavalryman followed her into the cellar, however, he discovered a hoard of meats, pies, cakes, butter, honey, and plentiful grain. Hauling this godsend out in large sacks, the gleeful Rebels brought back forage for the horses and a feast for their hungry comrades—providing balm for their bruised self-esteem as the defeated army withdrew into the mountains.⁶¹

As the infantry vanguard of Lee’s retreat, A. P. Hill’s corps slowly made its way through Monterey Gap on Saturday night. When Kilpatrick’s cavalry attacked and captured some of Hill’s wagons carrying wounded officers, Maj. C. C. Blacknall, 23rd North Carolina, became a Union prisoner. Blacknall suffered wounds to his mouth and neck during the fighting at Gettysburg on July 1. Not to be denied, he attempted to escape on Kilpatrick’s own horse but, had not enough strength to get away. Blacknall’s ill fortune did not end there. Imprisoned at Fort McHenry, he drew the fatal number when lots were cast for a Confederate officer to be hung in retaliation for a Federal

officer slated to be executed in Richmond as a spy. Fortunately or unfortunately for Blacknall, after a period of suspense, his death sentence was reprieved, but he ended up at Johnson’s Island on Lake Erie where Rebel prisoners suffered from cold and hunger.⁶²

Councils of War Always Adopt the Worst Course⁶³

Given this steady stream of information that Lee’s army was on the move, Meade called his commanders together that evening to discuss possible courses of action. According to Chief of Staff Butterfield, Meade informed his generals that his orders from Halleck were to cover Washington and Baltimore, and that he desired the earnest assistance and advice of every corps commander.⁶⁴

At the meeting, Meade posed four questions: (1) Shall this army remain here?; (2) If we remain here, shall we assume the offensive?; (3) Do you deem it expedient to move towards Williamsport, through Emmitsburg?; and, (4) Shall we pursue the enemy if he is retreating on his direct line of retreat? Butterfield’s tally showed the majority voted yes on the first question, no on the second, yes on the third, and yes, but with cavalry only, on the fourth. They desired to keep the army in place until a reconnaissance could determine Lee’s movements and intentions. According to Warren, there was concern among the generals that premature departure of the army from the battlefield would allow Lee to claim victory, and the prevailing mood was that we had saved the country for the time, so caution was called for not to jeopardize that success. Meade injected no advice or direction of his own, and merely acquiesced in the majority’s opinion.⁶⁵

Slocum, one of the generals who wanted to pursue Lee’s army immediately, was chagrined about the outcome, and later recalled the vote’s result differently: “On the fourth of July nearly every corps commander urged an immediate movement, but my corps was kept three days in idleness.” As word

60 OR, 27.2:516. A similar report came from Union pickets in position out in front of the army on the right. Eleventh Corps chief of staff Charles W. Asmussen informed Corps Commander Howard that pickets thought they were hearing artillery or wagon trains moving “in a western direction” out the Cashtown (Chambersburg) Road. OR, 27.2:516.

61 Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 235; monograph from GNMP Library files.

62 Schildt, *Roads from Gettysburg*, 11; *Confederate Veteran*, November 1898, 527.

63 William E. Cairnes, ed., *Napoleon’s Military Maxims* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 67.

64 Meade, *Life and Letters*, 116; Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 174; Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak*, 128, 153–56, 172, 259.

65 Meade, *Life and Letters*, 116; Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 174; Hyde, *The Union Generals Speak*, 128, 153–156, 172.

of the decision to delay pursuit of the army filtered back to the administration in Washington, the perceptive Secretary of the Navy Welles discerned the mood of the army's leadership and recorded his fear that, given their decision, "Lee and the Rebels may escape as a consequence." Welles thought that General-in-chief Halleck would be satisfied with Meade just driving Lee's army away, because "That has been his great anxiety, and too many of our officers think it sufficient if the Rebels quit and go off,—that it is unnecessary to capture, disperse and annihilate them." Welles worried about the president's decision to defer to Halleck in all military matters, because he believed the president had better instincts than Halleck who, in his opinion, was incapable of originating or directing military operations.⁶⁶

Meade reiterated his plans in a message to Baldy Smith informing him that he intended to remain at Gettysburg the following day burying the Union and Confederate dead, and determining the nature of enemy's intentions and movements by conducting a reconnaissance. Meade had decided to conform to the sentiments of his subordinates not to take the initiative or act aggressively until he learned more about Lee's plans. Meade stated his opinion the enemy was retreating via Fairfield and Cashtown, yet hesitated because of his uncertainty of this. Should the enemy be retreating, however, he planned to follow them by the way of Emmitsburg and Middletown, on their flank. This was the route Lee had anticipated Meade would take.⁶⁷

Meade's exchanges with the authorities in Washington demonstrate a gap in perception of political and strategic priorities at that point in the war. Lincoln envisaged an opportunity to end the conflict that had caused untold death and destruction by

applying the coup de grace to Lee's army. Meade, having assumed the mantle of army commander only a few days earlier, was insecure in his new role—leading to his concern about logistical issues rather than applying the deathblow to Lee's defeated army before it regained stability and confidence. As an apprentice to Generals McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker, Meade often advocated aggressive action on their part; yet, the generalship he espoused then had not risen to the surface in his brief role as army commander. Still, he had time to reorder his priorities, and outmaneuver Lee before his army reached the southern shore of the Potomac River. The new army commander's upright character and sense of responsibility was competing with an innate caution regarding offensive operations. It remained to be seen which would take precedence.⁶⁸

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Thomas J. Ryan is the author of the multiple award winning *Spies, Scouts, and Secrets during the Gettysburg Campaign*. He has written numerous articles and book reviews about the Civil War for newspapers and magazines over the past twenty years. His column "Civil War Profiles" appears weekly in the *Coastal Point* newspaper in Ocean View, Delaware, and he is a regular contributor of book reviews to *Civil War News* and other publications.

Richard R. Schaus grew up in Wisconsin, enlisted in the US Army in 1971 and retired in 2001 with the rank of Sergeant Major. He resides in West Virginia with his wife and their dogs and has been an almost lifelong student of the Battle of Gettysburg. Other interests include American military history and the outdoors.

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⁶⁶ William F. Fox, *In Memoriam, Henry Warner Slocum* (New York: J. B. Lyon Co., 1904), 84; "Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 1:358, 364.

⁶⁷ Because his army suffered a substantial number of casualties, Meade informed Smith he "would be glad to have you join him." OR, 27:3:517.

⁶⁸ For a sampling of Meade's views on the generalship of McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker, see *Life and Letters*, 1–319, 345, 351, 372, 374–75, 379. For a perspective on Meade's character traits, see Col. James C. Biddle, "General Meade at Gettysburg," *The Annals of the Civil War* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1994), 205–219.