

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 1 ★ Issue 1

American Civil War:

Gettysburg

DATE:

July 1-3, 1863

LOCATION:

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

OPPOSING FORCES

Union Army of the Potomac: Approx. 90,000, commanded by Gen. George Meade. Corps Commanders: Reynolds, Hancock, Sickles, Sykes, Sedgwick, Howard, Slocum, Pleasonton (Cavalry).

Confederate Army of Northern Virginia: Approx. 75,000, commanded by Gen. Robert E. Lee. Corps Commanders: Longstreet, Ewell, A.P. Hill, J.E.B. Stuart (Cavalry).

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Battle of Gettysburg was the largest battle ever fought on North American soil, with over 160,000 soldiers fighting for three days in and around this small Pennsylvania town. The toll was high on both sides including 23,055 Union casualties (3,155 killed) and 28,063 Confederate casualties (3,903 killed).¹

Although Antietam holds the dubious honor of the deadliest single day of fighting, more men fell on the fields of Gettysburg in three days than on any other North American battlefield before or since. More importantly, this battle represented a strategic turning point in the American Civil War, and has thus been referred to as the “high-water mark” of the Confederacy. While tactically a draw, strategically it was a major victory for the Union. After the battle, the Army of Northern Virginia limped home, never to regain their former strength and confidence. And although the fighting would continue for another two years, Gettysburg instilled new confidence in the Union army. They had proven to themselves, and to the world, that they could fight and win against the remarkable Robert E. Lee.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions in the Southern Camp – Prior to Gettysburg, the Confederacy faced the growing dilemma of Union pressure in both the western and eastern theaters. While Confederate leaders debated where to weight their efforts, Lee argued for another invasion north. With his recent stunning victory at Chancellorsville, a confident Lee wanted to press his advantage. After some debate, it was agreed that Lee would move north.

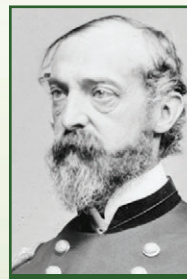
Confederate leaders had several goals for the campaign. They hoped to lift the constant threat to Richmond by forcing General Joseph Hooker (the Union commander at the time) to follow Lee north. They hoped the invasion would force

President Lincoln to reallocate forces from the west. They also wanted to relieve Virginia from the stress of war and allow Lee to feed his army off the plentiful resources of the Cumberland Valley. They also hoped an invasion would shorten the war by delivering a decisive battle, or at least delivering another blow to the political will of the North. And finally, there was still hope that the invasion would lead to European support for the Confederacy.²

On 3 June, Lee sent two corps (Longstreet and Ewell) west to the Shenandoah Valley, then north toward Pennsylvania using the Blue Ridge Mountains to screen their advance. (*Map 1, next page*)

Actions in the Northern Camp - After Chancellorsville, Lincoln not only feared for his Army's morale, but he was also keenly aware of a growing movement to end the war – even if it meant a divided nation. He stressed to Hooker the need for action. But before Hooker could take the offense, Lee's army began to move. Perhaps haunted by the specter of Chancellorsville, Hooker was overly cautious. Convinced that he was heavily outnumbered, he pressed Lincoln for reinforcements. When Lincoln refused, Hooker resigned.

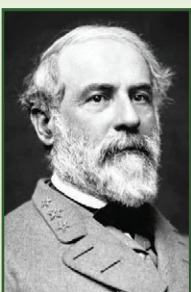
On 28 June, General George Meade awoke to a message from Lincoln. He was now in command of the Army of the Potomac. An 1835 graduate of West Point, Meade had a solid military record and a welcome down-to-earth leadership style. He took charge, and began moving his army north in supporting columns to meet the threat. Meade had little knowledge of the size or intent of the invading force as he began his movement-to-contact operation.



Gen. George Meade

On 30 June, as members of Buford's Union cavalry division (Pleasanton's cavalry corps) performed duty as the forward left screen of the Union advance, they encountered forward elements of Hill's Confederate III Corps on the outskirts of Gettysburg. The Confederates had

come into town for some shoes and other supplies. After a brief skirmish, the Confederates withdrew to the west. Buford, assuming the soldiers in gray would return the following day, dismounted his cavalry on McPherson's Ridge just northwest of town and prepared his defensive plan. Sure enough, early the following morning, on 1 July, Confederate skirmishers moved forward toward town. Buford's cavalry pickets saw the movement and fired. While neither commander had sought out this ground for battle, the Battle of Gettysburg had begun.

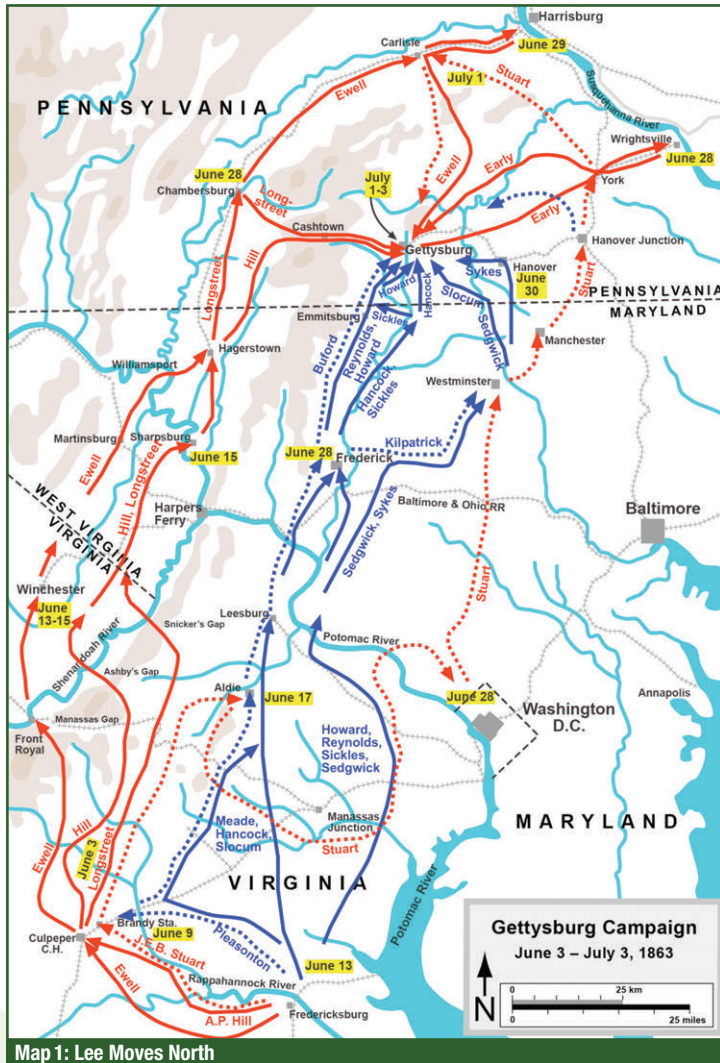


Gen. Robert E. Lee



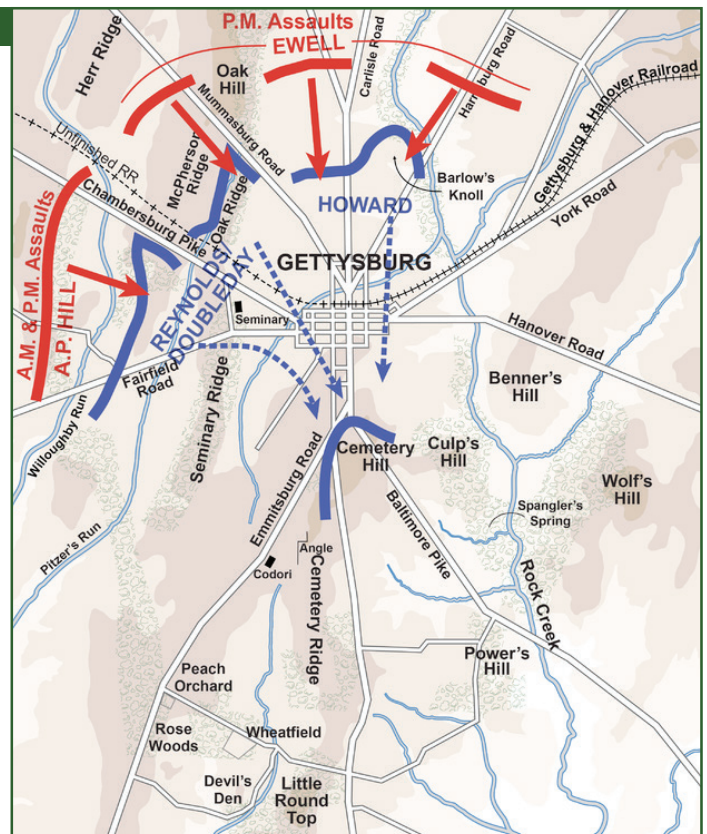
TACTICS OF THE BATTLE

Gettysburg was a meeting engagement that Lee turned into a deliberate attack. As forces deployed on the first day, the Union Army repositioned for a tactical defense. On the second day, Lee's army would pursue the tactical offense with deliberate attacks on both Union flanks. The battle ended on the third day, after Lee ordered the disastrous frontal assault on the Union center, known forever as "Pickett's Charge."



Day One – 1 July 1863: After the initial contact between the Confederates and Buford's Cavalry Division, the battle was a race to see who could bring more units into the fight. Since Lee had already intended to rally his army close to Gettysburg, he had the initial advantage. But Buford's effective defensive plan, combined with his hard-fighting dismounted cavalry and newer repeating rifles, successfully held off a numerically superior force for two hours. This delayed Hill's III Corps from the west, and Ewell's II Corps from the north, from deploying their units. It also enabled Reynolds, who arrived just in time to prevent the Confederates from overrunning Gettysburg and seizing the high ground south of town, to bring up his Union I Corps to relieve the outnumbered and beleaguered cavalry. (Map 2)

As the day wore on, two of Ewell's three divisions arrived on the scene, tipping the scales for the Confederates. Shortly after 1430,



Early's division (Ewell's II Corps) launched an aggressive attack from the northeast into a gap in the Union defenses, creating the first cracks that would cause the Union position to give way. Simultaneously, on the northwest, Heth's Confederate division fed additional forces against the Union's west flank.

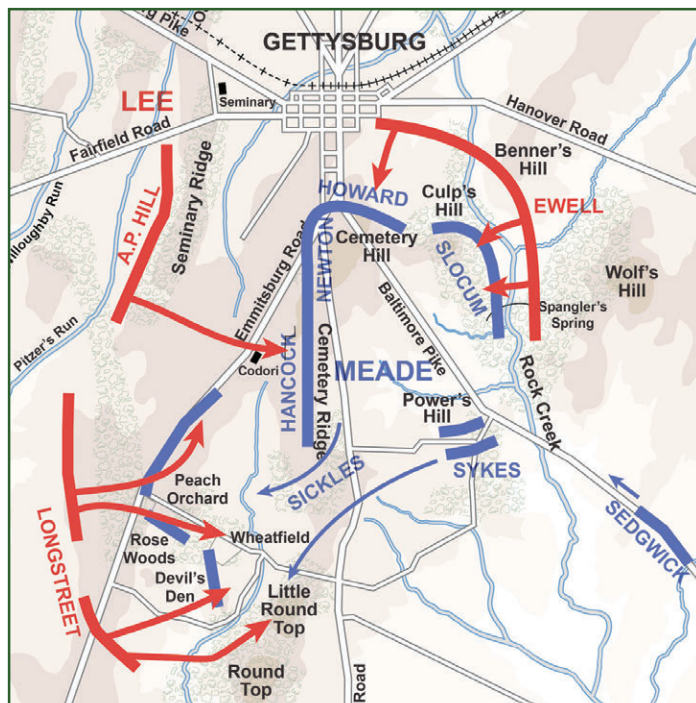
Outflanked and cracking in the middle, the Union position gave in. By 1600, Howard's XI Corps, on the Union right, streamed south through town in full retreat exposing the right flank and rear of the Union I Corps, now under Doubleday, who had just replaced the fatally-injured Reynolds. This forced I Corps to withdraw south to Cemetery Ridge where they were joined by XI Corps, also in a disorderly state of withdrawal. Union forces eventually settled down and built hasty defensive positions on the high ground of Cemetery Hill just south of town. The Union had already suffered 10,000 casualties against the Confederate's 7,000.

General Lee, arriving in time to see the confused Union retreat through town, saw an opportunity. Referring to Culp's Hill, he issued orders to Ewell. "Attack that hill, if practical."²³ But Ewell, waiting for reinforcements and unaccustomed to Lee's discretionary-style orders, delayed his attack for nearly two hours, giving Union forces time to prepare defensive positions. When Ewell's remaining division arrived it was dusk, and the attack was quickly called off. A precious opportunity was missed.

Earlier that day on the Union side, Meade issued orders for his remaining corps (XII, II, V, and VI Corps) to march, without delay, to Gettysburg. He sent Hancock forward to assess and take charge, while he packed up his field headquarters at Taneytown. Hancock's arrival, in the early hours of a chaotic situation, would prove critical to restoring order, while also ensuring Union forces established a defensive position on the high ground south of



town. This would set the conditions for later success. When Meade reached the site at 0100 that night, he built on Hancock's work, spending the remainder of the early morning creating what would become known as the "fishhook" defense, extending nearly three miles from Culp's Hill on the northeast down to Little Round Top on the southwest. (Map 3)

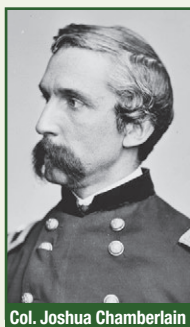


Map 3: Situation on Day 2

Day Two – 2 July: The next day started quietly. Lee met individually with Ewell and Longstreet, before issuing orders designed to create a coordinated attack on both Union flanks. Longstreet would be the main effort on the Union left, while Ewell would support, applying pressure on the Union right and exploiting any opportunity. Hill would demonstrate to hold Meade's center. But the attack, which was supposed to start at 1100, was delayed five hours, much of the time lost to confusion in how Longstreet repositioned his two divisions. Finally, at 1530, Longstreet's artillery opened fire, and after a thirty-minute barrage designed to weaken Sickles' defensive line, Longstreet began his attack.

Meanwhile, Meade had his own problems. Before the attack, Sickles (Meade's III Corps commander), unsatisfied with his position on the Union left flank, decided to move forward toward Emmitsburg Road. This uncoordinated action exposed the entire Union left flank near Little Round Top.

Fortunately, Gouverneur K. Warren, Meade's Chief Engineer, noticed the gaps and filled them with nearby troops from Sykes' V Corps (including Vincent's brigade and Col. Chamberlain's



Col. Joshua Chamberlain

20th Maine), just in time to counter Hood's Confederate Division (Longstreet's I Corps) rushing up the hill. Although Union forces would hold the terrain, the resulting close-in and bayonet fighting around Little Round Top showed the tenacity and bravery of the soldiers on both sides. Warren's move anchored the Union line, preventing the Confederates from gaining Little Round Top and an enfilading position over the entire Union left flank.

After several hours of grueling close combat on the Union left flank, in the Peach Orchard, the Wheat Field, and Devil's Den, the numerical superiority of Longstreet's 20,000 troops began to push Sickles' III Corps back toward Cemetery Ridge.

Unfortunately for Lee, the two assaults were uncoordinated. As Longstreet's attack on the Union left began to sputter, Ewell's attack on the Union right was just beginning. This allowed Meade to use his interior lines to reallocate forces from his right flank and reserves to plug holes in his lines. These extra troops eventually ground Confederate attacks to a halt.

The Confederates did find some success on the Union's far right. As darkness fell, Johnson's division managed to take over Union trenches on the eastern side of Culp's Hill, putting them in position to turn the entire Union flank. Lee still held the initiative as quiet settled over the battlefield that night, but the Union Army was gaining confidence. They had held the line.

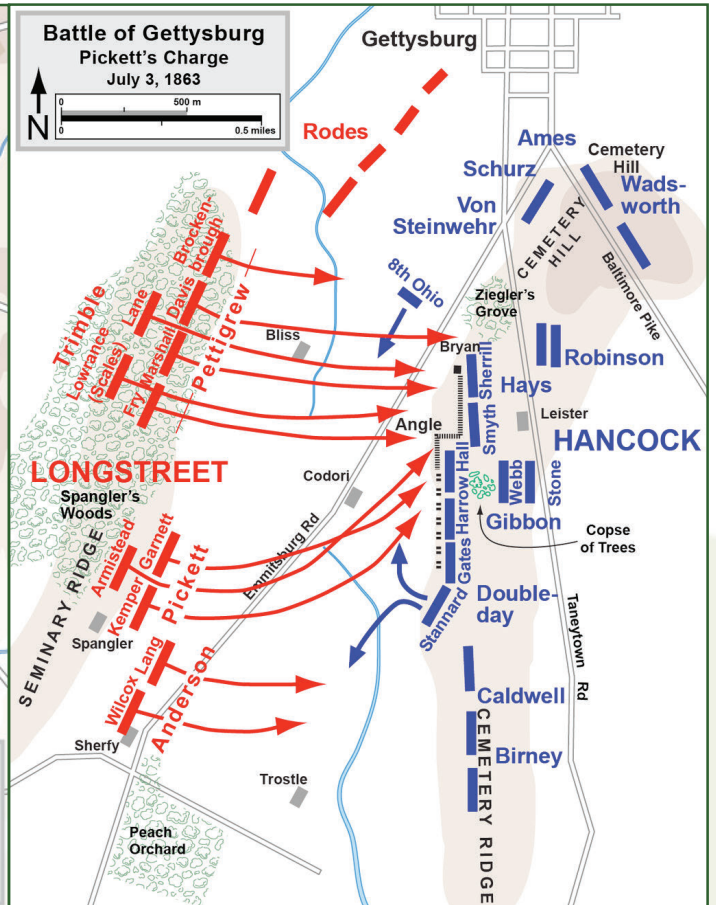
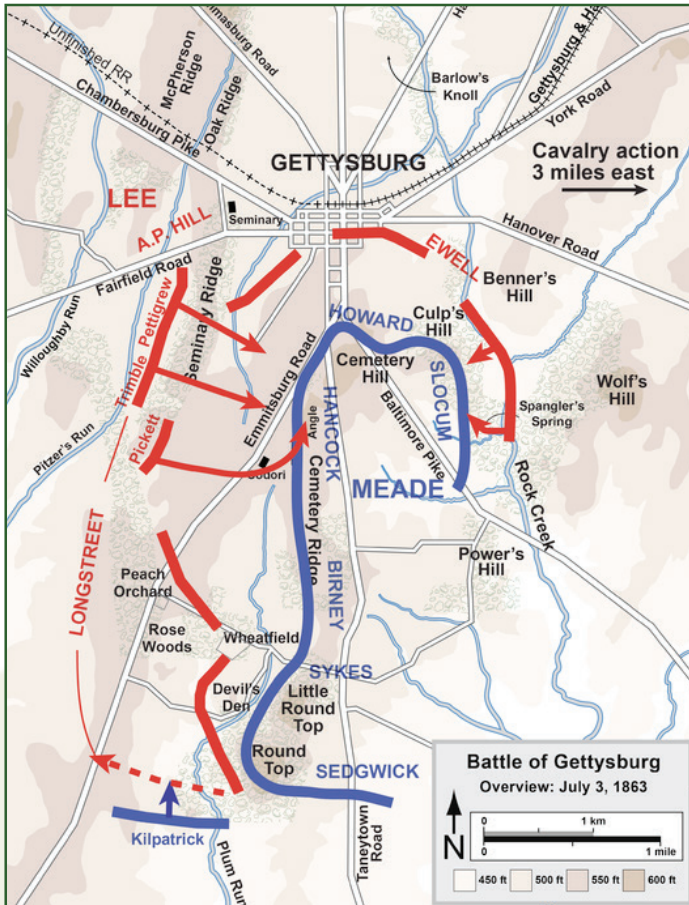
That night, Meade summoned his top commanders for a council of war. This professional body of officers, almost all of whom were West Point graduates, reached a consensus to remain on the defense. "If Lee attacks tomorrow, it will be on your front," Meade said to Gibbon as he departed. When asked why, Meade replied, "Because he has made attacks on both our flanks and failed, and if he concludes to try it again, it will be on our center."⁴

Day Three – 3 July: At first light, Lee hoped to press his advantage on the Union right, but Union forces acted first. Geary's division (Slocum's XII Corps) attacked in a bloody contest that raged for nearly seven hours on the slopes of Culp's Hill. Eventually, Johnson was forced to abandon the trenches, allowing Union forces to re-anchor their right flank. Meade had won the first round of 3 July.

Lee, believing his previous attacks on both flanks had significantly weakened the Union center, ordered Longstreet to lead the final assault into the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. Pickett's division (Longstreet's Corps) would lead the three-division frontal assault, forever known as "Pickett's Charge". Despite Longstreet's protests, Lee persisted, ordering the attack to commence promptly at 1000 hrs. (Maps 4 and 5)

Longstreet, reluctant to send so many men across a mile of open fields, took longer than expected to prepare. But at 1307 the wood line on Seminary Ridge exploded with 140 Confederate cannons. Union artillery, 80 guns strong, quickly countered in an artillery exchange that lasted nearly two hours, inflicted heavy casualties on both sides, and would be the largest artillery duel ever on the American continent.

At 1500, as the guns fell silent, three divisions (15,000 men) moved from the protective woods on Seminary Ridge toward the Union line.



Map 4: Overview of Day 3, Map 5: Pickett's Charge



Maj. Gen. George Pickett


Three rows of men, waving 47 regimental flags, reached Emmitsburg Road just as 200 Union cannons, firing shell, shrapnel, canister, and double canister, tore through the ranks. Remarkably, they kept advancing.

As the now-tattered remnants neared Cemetery Ridge, the 8th Ohio on the north and Vermont's Green Mountain Boys dealt crushing blows to both Confederate flanks.

Men in gray, converging toward the "clump of trees," continued to fall until the last few units breached the Union line. Most notably was Gen. Armistead's Confederate Brigade, who were quickly defeated in brutal hand-to-hand combat at the "Bloody Angle." As the attack ended, Confederate

soldiers staggered back to the refuge of Spangler Woods, while Union troops, having held the line, erupted in cheers.

Lee, who had just lost 5,000 soldiers in a single hour, had no thoughts of retreat. Meeting his commanders as they returned, he fully accepted responsibility for the failed attack and prepared for a Union counterattack that would never come.

On 5 July, satisfied that Meade did not intend a counterattack, Lee moved his army south. Meade followed, cautiously keeping his army between Lee and the city of Washington. He would later be criticized for allowing the Confederates to withdraw back to Virginia unmolested. On 13 July, Lee crossed south into Virginia and the campaign ended. 



LESSONS LEARNED

Gettysburg, like all great battles, provides insights into strategy, operational art, military decision-making, leadership, and tactics. A few lessons stand out...

Strategic/Operational:

1) Objective – Despite some reasonable goals for the campaign, Lee lacked a clear military objective. To conduct offensive operations against a larger army, in the enemy's own territory, requires a compelling objective. This may have put additional pressure on Lee, forcing him to accept battle under less than favorable conditions. Meade, on the other hand, had a clear objective - to defend Washington from Lee's invading Army - which allowed him to take up a more advantageous tactical defense against Lee.

2) Intelligence – Lee was accustomed to the valuable intelligence provided by his cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart. But Stuart's screening and harassment actions east of the Union force led to a complete loss of operational intelligence for Lee. Stuart did not return until 2 July, after Lee was fully committed. With better intelligence, Lee may have better seen his tactical disadvantage after day one. Facing a numerically superior force, with tactical interior lines, in a prepared defensive position, Lee may have decided against fighting at Gettysburg in the first place.

3) Maneuver – Senior commanders win battles by positioning their forces favorably prior to the fight. This is the essence of operational strategy. Neither Lee nor Meade were in good positions to judge the initial site selection for battle around Gettysburg, and largely abdicated this responsibility to their subordinate leaders during the initial meeting engagement and its build-up on 1 July. Meade's subordinate commanders, Buford and Hancock, would end up with the high ground and a positional advantage over Lee.

Tactical:

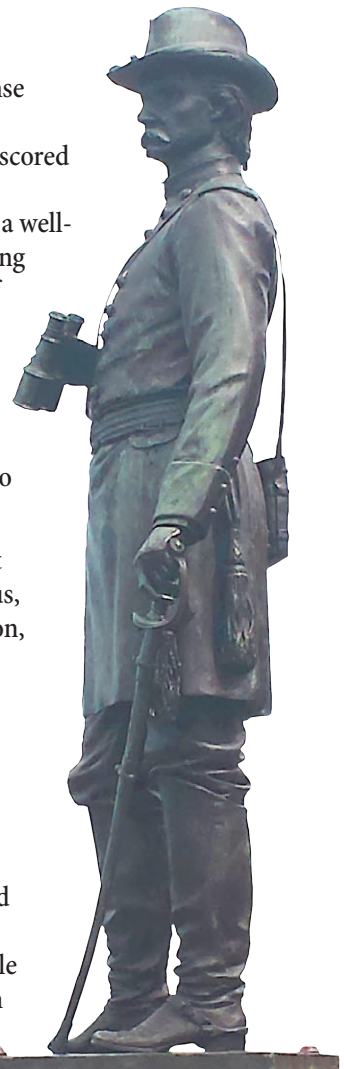
1) Superiority of the Tactical Defense – Gettysburg reinforces the superiority of the tactical defense during this period of warfare. Prepared positions, combined with increasingly accurate weapons, gave defenders a marked advantage (an early foreshadowing of the horrors of World War I). This was underscored by one of the greatest tactical errors of Lee's career - the final Confederate charge into the Union center (Pickett's Charge). It is surprising that Lee would order his men to cross a mile of open terrain, against a well-dug-in opponent. To compound the error, Lee attacked on a broad front of nearly a mile, while funneling forces toward the "clump of trees". A narrow front, striking in depth, might have had a better chance of breaching the Union line.

2) Overconfidence – With his recent victory at Chancellorsville, Lee had reason to feel confident. But overconfidence is a dangerous thing. Hill and Ewell were inexperienced corps commanders far from the mold of Stonewall Jackson. Lee also made costly assumptions about his opponent. Not only did he underestimate Meade's numerical superiority, he also underestimated Meade's ability to reposition his forces using his advantage of interior lines.

3) Mission Command – Lee's battle plans were never well-synchronized in their execution. The best example was the second day's attacks on both Union flanks. If they would have been more simultaneous, it's doubtful Meade could have effectively reallocated troops the way he did. This lack of synchronization, especially between Longstreet's and Ewell's corps, allowed Meade to fight one assault at a time. Unlike Meade, Lee never met - all together - with his key commanders during the 3-day battle.

4) Economy of Force – Meade repelled aggressive Confederate attacks on both his flanks through skillful reallocation of forces. Taking advantage of his interior lines and pulling forces from secondary efforts, Meade demonstrated exceptional economy-of-force operations throughout the battle.

5) Leadership – Several individuals were decisive to the outcome. Buford's delaying action on Day 1, combined with Hancock's ability to rapidly position arriving Union forces into the fight, effectively held off A.P. Hill's advances and allowed Union forces to own the key terrain. This set the conditions for the remainder of the battle. Additionally, Warren's ability to plug gaps in the Union left flank, covering Little Round Top, combined with Vincent's and Chamberlain's tenacious efforts to hold the line on the Union left flank, proved critical.



Battle Digest™ is edited and produced by **Christopher J. Petty** (Brigadier General, retired), who is also the lead author for this issue. Battle Digest™ is a trademark of Trinsicore, LLC. The contents of this publication are copyrighted by Trinsicore LLC, except as noted in 'Endnotes, Maps, and Images.' All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, without the prior written permission of Trinsicore, LLC, except for short passages used for the purposes of review. To request copies of this, or other issues, please visit www.BattleDigest.com.



For more, visit us online at
www.BattleDigest.com



Discussion Questions:

1) Discuss the strategic goals and risks for the Confederacy associated with its planned invasion of the North during the Gettysburg Campaign.

2) Describe how each commander effectively used, or failed to use, different principles of war. (Mass, Offense, Unity of command, Surprise, Economy of force, Maneuver, Objective, Security, and Simplicity)

3) Describe both Lee's and Meade's use of Mission Command. What Mission Command failures hindered Confederate performance?

4) Provide some examples of individual leadership that positively affected the battle's outcome.

5) What was the significance of the Union victory at Gettysburg?



Suggested Readings:

Gottfried, Bradley M. *The Maps of Gettysburg: An Atlas of the Gettysburg Campaign, June 3 - July 13, 1863*. California, 2010.

Petruzzi, J. David, and Steven Stanley. *The Complete Gettysburg Guide: Walking and Driving Tours of the Battlefield, Town, Cemeteries, Field Hospital Sites, and other Topics of Historical Interest*. California, 2009.

Pfanz, Harry W. *Gettysburg - The First Day*. North Carolina, 2001.

Pfanz, Harry W. *Gettysburg - The Second Day*. North Carolina, 1987.

Sears, Stephen W. *Gettysburg*. New York, 2003.



Endnotes, Maps, and Images

Endnotes: ¹American Military History [Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, 1989]: 253; ²Great Battles of the Civil War [New York: Gallery Books, 1984]: 290; ³Edward J. Stackpole and Wilbur S. Nye, *The Battle of Gettysburg: A Guided Tour*, Centennial Edition, [Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Company, 1960]: 40; ⁴ *Ibid.*, 70. **Maps:** Maps are by Hal Jespersen, www.posix.com/CW, via Wikimedia Commons. **Images:** *Lee*, from Wikimedia Commons, [Public domain]; *Meade*: Library of Congress, [Public domain]; *Springfield Rifled Musket*: Smithsonian, US Government, [Public domain]; *Chamberlain*: Library of Congress, [Public domain]; *Pickett*: Library of Congress, [Public domain]; *Battle of Gettysburg painting*: Library of Congress, [Public domain]; *Civil War Engineer*: Library of Congress, [Public domain]; *Gettysburg statue of Union General G.K. Warren*: New Jersey Dept. of Military & Veterans Affairs, [Public domain]

