

FROM DISASTER TO BRILLIANCE: THE TRANSMUTATION OF LEE'S PLAN AT GETTYSBURG

John D. Wedo and Terrence L. Salada

It is fitting to start by describing a battle in the American Civil War (ACW) in which the defender stayed behind defenses on elevated ground and waited for the opposing army to attack. When the attack began, it was repelled repeatedly at great loss. The defender maintained a defensive stance throughout the battle even when the attacking army was defeated before him. The defeated general collected his army and departed with no interference or attempted interference from the defender. The victorious general is lauded for his good sense in maintaining his position, whereas the defeated general is derided for attacking such a formidable position. The best example of such a tactical disaster was Fredericksburg, Virginia, fought on December 17, 1862, a Confederate victory. Except for the last sentence, it could also describe Gettysburg. But why are the historical opinions of the generals different for Gettysburg? Professor Warren W. Hassler, Jr., expressed the same thought:

“There is probably no other battle,” writes General Francis A. Walker, “of which men are so prone to think and speak without a conscious reference to the commanding general of the victorious party, as they are regarding Gettysburg.” Why, it might be asked, does this curious phenomenon exist regarding the commander of the triumphant Union Army of the Potomac, Major General George Gordon Meade?¹

The measure of the battle is statistical, and the numbers should speak for themselves, but often do not register. On July 1, 2, and 3, 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia of General Robert E. Lee fought the Army of the Potomac commanded by General

George Gordon Meade near the small, south-central Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. Lee's approximately 75,000 men lost to Meade's approximately 83,000. Of those numbers, total Federal casualties (killed, wounded, and missing) were approximately 23,000 (28%) against Confederate casualties of approximately 28,000 (37%), for a total of 51,000.² Characterized by furious Confederate attacks and a dogged Federal defense, Gettysburg saw some of the hardest fighting of the war. On July 3 occurred one of the war's most famous infantry charges, known as Pickett's Charge, as it is popularly called today. Named after one of its division commanders, General George Pickett, it was comparable to events at Fredericksburg, but with the positions of attack and defense reversed.

Although the Army of the Potomac suffered severe losses at Gettysburg, by *any* measure, the battle was a significant disaster for the Army of Northern Virginia.

The importance of the Federal victory was recognized early as evidenced by the ceremony and Lincoln's address four months later. The number of monuments placed there by veterans offers silent, but manifest, reflection of that importance. With time, the battle was viewed as pivotal for the war in the East, a defeat from which the South did not recover and in which Lee had met his match (although it is always easy for Southern apologists to claim that Lee was not defeated in the battle). This had long been history's view of the battle, but recent historiography in at least three books attempts to upend this view from that of a Confederate disaster *to* a battle with a plan by Lee *to* a battle with a good plan by Lee *to* a battle with a brilliant plan by Lee that almost succeeded or should have succeeded or could have succeeded, but for the dismal performance of Lee's generals. (One is tempted to catch one's breath after enumerating that sequence.)

This paper will discuss this recent re-evaluation of Lee's performance at the battle. This paper will show that although identifying Lee's battle plan should be simple, harmless, historical investigation, it can lead to a deflection of responsibility for the battle's outcome from Lee and a misjudgment of the battle's result. This paper first enumerates and summarizes the three books in question. These books are *Last Chance for Victory: Robert E. Lee and the Gettysburg Campaign* by Scott Bowden and Bill Ward, *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg and Why It Failed* by Tom Carhart, and Phillip Tucker's *Pickett's Charge: A New Look at Gettysburg's Final Attack*. This paper then uses the commentary of participants and prominent historians to offer balanced views of Lee's plan, whatever it was, and execution of his orders during the battle.

However, some disclaimers are warranted. All discussion of generals in this paper are limited to facts and statistics. This paper will not "rate" generals and leaves that unnecessary task to others because the only substantive conduct is that *on the day of the battle*. None of the points presented is intended to suggest that any side in that conflict was superior to the other: both North and South were part of the American culture. This paper never questions the incredible and inexhaustible courage and fortitude of the common soldiers who suffered, regardless of how their generals chose to fight battles.

Finally, this paper correlates actions and persons to those in other conflicts, a technique uncommon in Civil War historiography with the notable exceptions of the works of Fletcher Pratt and John Keegan. However, using such an approach can often help cast new light on relevant topics and explain them better than in isolation.

THE BOOKS AND DIFFERENT HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

These three recent books involved in Gettysburg's transmutation have all appeared since 2000. They are summarized in this section as to their content and proposals, but this paper will not serve as a book review. It is suggested that the reader refer to one of many web sites established for this purpose. In addition, for this paper, the authors of the three books in this section will be referred to collectively as "the topic authors" to distinguish them from the other authors mentioned.

The journey starts in 2001 with the publication of Bowden and Ward's *Last Chance for Victory*. In this book, the authors claim that historians have misunderstood all of Lee's actions and that they can be explained by his upbringing and his military training and experience. The loss, on the other hand, can be explained by various setbacks that occurred to the Confederate Army. It would almost seem that their goal is to correct what they perceive as false assertions about Lee's performance at Gettysburg. They maintain that much of this misinformation has been repeated so much as to become dogma and that it is all largely untrue. An example of this assertion follows:

It is our sincere hope that if readers come away from this study with but one thing, it is that Robert E. Lee planned and waged one of his finest battles of the war at Gettysburg. The myth that Lee was a disinterested bystander who passively allowed his subordinates to do whatever they pleased and desired only to throw his legions forward in a direct attack against Meade's powerful front must be put to bed once and for all.³

They argue strongly that the battle was lost on July 2. In their list of 17 reasons for the loss (of which only four are related to Federal deeds), four of the first seven reasons involve July 2 and none of the first seven involves July 3. Their top seven reasons for the Confederate defeat are:

1. The breakdown of the July 2 echelon attack and the wounding of General Dorsey Pender.

2. General Richard Ewell's failure to pursue with Second Corps on July 1.

3. The wounding of John Bell Hood early in the fighting on July 2.

4. The absence of General James Ewell Brown (Jeb) Stuart and his cavalry.

5. General Ambrose Powell Hill and the mishandling of Third Corps. [This covers all three days of the battle.]

6. The failure of Ewell to timely inform General Lee on July 1 that Culp's Hill was vulnerable and subject to capture.

7. The failure of Second Corps' senior officers to coordinate their movements and get their commands into action on July 2.⁴

They highlight what they consider Lee's excellent performance and the deficient performance of many of his generals, as indicated by six of the seven reasons above. Their presentation is based on exhaustive research into Lee's actions during the battle. At many points in the book, they devote entire sections to staunchly refuting criticisms of Lee by other, established authors. For instance, they defend Lee's choice of echelon attack and its management in a nine-page section entitled "Robert E. Lee and July 2."⁵

The year 2005 saw the publication of *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg and Why It Failed* by Tom Carhart. Carhart claims that the key element of the third day was not the infantry attacks on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge, but the cavalry attack three miles east of Gettysburg off the Hanover Road. This is part of the national park today and is known as the East Cavalry Battlefield. Per his theory, Jeb Stuart's cavalry division was supposed to drive toward the Federal line from the rear (east) and overwhelm the Federal

infantry, which was supposed to be reeling from the Confederate infantry attacks. Repeated Federal cavalry attacks led by Generals David Gregg and George Custer prevented Stuart from accomplishing his mission, to wit:

The major reason for the failure of this masterful plan is that Lee and Stuart both failed to consider the fighting power of Custer.⁶

It seems very reasonable to say that, at Gettysburg, Custer truly saved the Union.⁷

The third book to examine is Tucker's *Pickett's Charge: A New Look at Gettysburg's Final Attack*. Tucker also suggests that this charge was not supposed to be the main part of the attack on the third day of the battle. Tucker argues against the "myth" that the charge was pointless; instead, Lee's plan for the afternoon Confederate attack included the massive artillery bombardment, Pickett's Charge, and Stuart's cavalry attack behind the Federal line. Lee formulated this plan, which Tucker calls "brilliant," based on sound Napoleonic principles. He also highlights the considerable contribution to the charge of graduates of the Virginia Military Institute of Lexington, Virginia.

Tucker wastes no time in stating his case: the title of Chapter 1 is "Genesis of Pickett's Charge: Evolution of a Brilliant Tactical Plan."⁸ His assessment is: "Lee correctly calculated in striking at exactly the right place and the right time, while utilizing a bold battle plan that was as brilliant as it was innovative."⁹ He also deflects blame from Lee:

But as he [Lee] diplomatically hinted, Lee's top lieutenants had badly let him down in not supporting Pickett's Charge to exploit its success: Ambrose P. Hill and Ewell (new corps commanders promoted well beyond their limited capabilities), Stuart's failure to strike from the east, and [General James] Longstreet, who was in charge of the assault—who failed not only Lee but also the men of Pickett's Charge. From beginning to end, the personal failures and flaws of Lee's top lieutenants doomed the great attack.¹⁰

Taking the union of the arguments presented in these three books, one finds three themes:

1. Lee had a “plan” that was a classically brilliant, innovative, flawless masterpiece. That plan was to destroy the Union Army by taking Cemetery Hill by some combination of artillery, infantry, and possibly including cavalry.

2. This flawless plan was spoiled *only* by the inaction or errors from his generals on either July 2 or 3, and that Lee’s decisions and actions were pure and correct and contributed almost nothing to the defeat.

3. In most cases, they offer only grudging acknowledgement of the role of Meade and the Union Army, if they accord Meade any credit at all. Even Lee biographer and historian Douglas Southall Freeman was generous in this regard.

Given the amplitude and sweep of the Confederate defeat, one is tempted to ask: What is wrong with this picture?

The critical response proposed in this paper is based on a simple observation: In the face of the Confederate defeat, the topic authors try too hard to elevate Lee’s performance. This approach has three unfortunate effects:

1. The enhancements to Lee’s performance includes upgrades to the quality of his plan and insight into the Federal army, even though he lacked proper reconnaissance throughout the battle.

2. Events that proved detrimental to the Confederates are used to deflect blame from Lee; among them the supposed insubordination or incompetence of subordinate officers, insufficient supplies, missing brigades, or the death or wounding of key generals. The newest part of this quasi-restoration from the topic authors is to propose that not only

were Lee's subordinates responsible for the loss—even Freeman points out the deficiencies of various generals—but they ruined Lee's subjectively brilliant battle plan.

3. The reasons for the battle's outcome are hidden because such labyrinthine analyses concentrate on Confederate misfortune and ignore Federal proficiency.

Of course, history is not set in stone; every event is open for review. If new facts correct standard facts or provide additional understanding of existing facts, history benefits. An excellent example is the de-classified report in the mid-1970s that the Allies during World War II had broken the codes from the German Enigma machine. This additional information resulted in the examination of every Allied decision in the European Theater of Operations to determine the existence and quality of decoded Enigma intelligence that helped to form the decision. This task took years and resulted in two groups of World War II histories with a clear demarcation: those before the Enigma information was released and those studies that came after. Note that this re-examination changed no battle or its result, nor did it turn a wrong decision into a good one—it merely explained those decisions based on a new set of data.

However, with Gettysburg, there are rarely new facts or smoking guns to offer widely different interpretations of the events of that battle. As will be seen, official battle reports offer some insight here, but these have long been available since their publication in the 1880s. Other sources are contemporaneous letters and diaries from the participants. Even were there hypothetical agreement that Lee formulated a battle plan, it cannot be proved that it was a “brilliant” plan. *The number of letters, diaries, or accounts that proclaim Lee's plan “brilliant” does not make it so.* Besides which, “brilliant” is only a

value judgment with no valid, analyzable criteria. What can be analyzed are command actions, of which any plan, brilliant or not, is only a part.

In summary, the three books discussed in this paper present different theories for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg. Positing that previous historians have erred, they offer variations on the topographic objective of Lee's plans and on the quality of those plans.

COMMENTARY BY PARTICIPANTS

Before dissecting or commenting on plans or performance, it is important to consider commentary about those elements of the battle. To offer a balanced collection, it is helpful to present a sample of excerpts from participants and authors of high repute or credential. Commentary from six participants appears first, and they are presented in rough order of production or publication.

The first samples come from the primary participant and subject, General Robert E. Lee: his two official reports of the battles, sent to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. The first report is a brief letter written shortly after the battle, and the second is much more detailed, as one would expect from Lee, but its details offer insights into his thinking. The first report, dated July 4, offers this summary of July 2 and 3:

On the 2d July, [General James] Longstreet's corps, with the exception of one division, having arrived, we attempted to dislodge the enemy, and, though we gained some ground, we were unable to get possession of his position. The next day, the third division of General Longstreet having come up, a more extensive attack was made. The works on the enemy's extreme right and left were taken, but his numbers were so great and his position so commanding, that our troops were compelled to relinquish their advantage and retire.¹¹

It is unclear which of the enemy's works he refers to; he also appears to downplay the extent of the defeat:

The enemy's loss was heavy, including more than 4,000 prisoners.

It is believed that the enemy suffered severely in these operations, but our own loss has not been light.¹²

In the second, more detailed report dated January 20, 1864, three features suggest what he might have been thinking to defeat the Federals. First, he thought that Union forces on "Cemetery Hill" were his objective. Few in either army knew the names of local landmarks. For example, the Medal of Honor citation to General Joshua Chamberlain's Medal, awarded in 1893, refers to "Great Round Top,"¹³ and during the battle, Confederates referred to Little Round Top with various names, one of which was "the rocky hill."¹⁴ An online search of "Cemetery" in Lee's official report produces seven hits, all of which refer to Cemetery Hill. Cemetery *Ridge* never appears. All of Lee's discussions with his corps commanders were about Cemetery Hill, an indicator that Lee treated the landmarks of hill and ridge as one feature. This is consistent with his view of the Union line from the Confederate line.

Second, throughout the battle, both commanders studied their own lines and those of the enemy, Lee starting on the afternoon of July 1 and Meade on the morning of July 2. That Lee studied the local topography is evident from paragraph 32. In this paragraph, he also refers to yet another ridge, the Emmitsburg Road Ridge (*italics added*), which he also believed occupied by the Federals:

The enemy occupied a strong position, with his right upon two commanding elevations adjacent to each other, one southeast and the other, known as Cemetery Hill, immediately south of the town, which lay at its base. His line extended thence upon *the high ground along the Emmitsburg road* with a steep ridge in rear, which

was also occupied. This ridge was difficult of ascent, particularly the two hills above mentioned as forming its northern extremity, and a third at the other end, on which the enemy's left rested. Numerous stone and rail fences along the slope served to afford protection to his troops and impede our advance. In his front, the ground was undulating and generally open for about three-quarters of a mile.¹⁵

Third, in paragraphs 34 through 36, Lee describes the plan for July 2: Longstreet's First Corps would attack the Federal left and A. P. Hill (Third Corps) and Ewell (Second Corps) would threaten the Federal center and right.¹⁶ He wrote:

It was determined to make the principal attack on the enemy's left, and endeavor to gain a position from which it was thought that our artillery could be brought to bear with effect. Longstreet was directed to place the divisions of McLaws and Hood on the right of Hill, partially enveloping the enemy's left, which he was to drive in.¹⁷

It is clear from his report that his plan of attack on July 2 was to be heaviest against the Union *left*, which was presumed to be Cemetery Ridge.

Then, in paragraph 42, Lee summarizes his plan for July 3:

The result of this day's [July 2] operations induced the belief that, with proper concert of action, and with the increased support that the positions gained on the right would enable the artillery to render the assaulting columns, we should ultimately succeed, and it was accordingly determined to continue the attack. The general plan was unchanged. Longstreet, re-enforced by Pickett's three brigades, which arrived near the battle-field during the afternoon of the 2d, was ordered to attack the next morning, and General Ewell was directed to assail the enemy's right at the same time. The latter, during the night, re-enforced General [Edward] Johnson with two brigades from Rodes' and one from Early 's division.¹⁸

Thus, Lee wished to continue his battle plan from the previous day. Regardless of what one thinks of the result of either day of battle, Lee knew exactly what he intended and had a plan to accomplish it. However, it is unclear how well he communicated that plan to the commanders responsible for its execution.

However, it is also true that nowhere in his report did Lee state, "The capture of Cemetery Hill was Longstreet's objective on July 2 and 3." Three of his seven references

to Cemetery Hill are in describing the terrain or his lines, three involve Ewell's attacks on July 2, and the last describes the source of some of the Federal artillery fire during Pickett's Charge.¹⁹ And nowhere does he discuss a coordinated attack plan of overwhelming artillery with Pickett's Charge on the Federal front, and Stuart's cavalry attacking that same besieged line in the rear. Were this *the* grand battle plan, he should have been obliged to state this in his report to his president. (Unless, of course, Lee was practicing his normal care in wording his reports to place little blame on his officers.)

The next examples are from James Longstreet. First is his official report, dated July 27, 1863. Just as with Lee, Longstreet made no specific reference to Cemetery Ridge, only "Cemetery Hill." These two examples describe Pickett's Charge:

Brig. Gen. R. B. Garnett was killed while gallantly leading his brigade in the assault upon the enemy's position upon the Cemetery Hill.

Major-General Pickett's division merits especial credit for the determined manner in which it assaulted the enemy's strong position upon the Cemetery Hill.²⁰

Longstreet, Lee's senior corps commander and commander of the attack, thought that the landmark across the field from Seminary Ridge was Cemetery Hill.

After Lee's death in 1870, many former Confederates blamed Longstreet for the loss at Gettysburg, the battle's significance having become apparent with time. In turn, Longstreet defended himself and his generalship in several magazine articles and his memoir, *From Manassas to Appomattox* (1896). In his book, once again, there are no references to Cemetery Ridge, but he does refer to different topological features. In his chapter on the first day, he writes:

The prominent point of the south ridge is Cemetery Hill, and east of this is Culp's Hill, from which the ridge turns sharply south half a mile and drops off into low grounds ... From Cemetery Hill the ground is elevated, the ridge sloping south to

the cropping out of Little Round Top, Devil's Den, and the bolder Round Top, the latter about three miles south of the town. Cemetery Hill is nearly parallel to Seminary Ridge, and is more elevated.²¹

He [Lee] ordered Anderson forward, and rode on to Seminary Ridge in time to view the closing operations of the engagement. The Union troops were in disorder, climbing Cemetery Heights, the Confederates following through the streets of Gettysburg.²²

Here Longstreet acknowledged that Cemetery Hill has a "ridge," although he never referred to it as Cemetery Ridge. Second, he used another term, Cemetery "Heights," and this is 33 years after the battle. Because he previously referred to Cemetery Hill and refers to Anderson viewing the Federal retreat "climbing Cemetery Heights" *from* Seminary Ridge, he obviously continued to treat hill and ridge as one feature, namely Cemetery Hill. This also shows that terrain features were called different things by soldiers North and South.

The third sample is the official battle report of another controversial participant, General Jeb Stuart, commander of the army's cavalry division, dated August 20, 1863. Because his raid took him inadvertently around the Army of the Potomac, his division did not meet up with the Confederate Army until the afternoon of July 2. His account of July 3 starts thus:

On the morning of July 3, pursuant to instructions from the commanding general (the ground along our line of battle being totally impracticable for cavalry operations), I moved forward to a position to the left of General Ewell's left, and in advance of it, where a commanding ridge completely controlled a wide plain of cultivated fields stretching toward Hanover, on the left, and reaching to the base of the mountain spurs, among which the enemy held position...I moved this command [Jenkin's] and W. H. F. Lee's secretly through the woods to a position, and hoped to effect a surprise upon the enemy's rear...²³

After describing the battle east of town between the York and Hanover Roads, he offered this assessment:

During this day's operations, I held such a position as not only to render Ewell's left entirely secure, where the firing of my command, mistaken for that of the enemy, caused some apprehension, but commanded a view of the routes leading to the enemy's rear. Had the enemy's main body been dislodged, as was confidently hoped and expected, I was in precisely the right position to discover it and improve the opportunity. I watched keenly and anxiously the indications in his rear for that purpose, while in the attack which I intended (which was forestalled by our troops being exposed to view), his cavalry would have separated from the main body, and gave promise of solid results and advantages.²⁴

It appears that Lee did order Stuart to Ewell's left to "effect a surprise upon the enemy's rear." Later in the report, Stuart produced the vague statement, "Had the enemy's main body been dislodged..." which is unclear because it does not state where he thought the "main body" was located. He also wrote that he was "precisely the right position to discover it and improve the opportunity." Thus, Stuart wrote that he was guarding Ewell's left and waiting to attack if an opportunity arose, which is different from being assigned to attack as part of a grand plan. Also, nowhere does Stuart mention that he was to attack the Union "center," or the rear of Cemetery Hill or Ridge because from East Cavalry Battlefield, one cannot see Cemetery Hill or Ridge. Finally, it is important to note that of the six participants to be discussed, Stuart is the only one who died during the war and therefore had no opportunity to reflect on his wartime experiences.

The fourth example is from the official report filed by General Richard Ewell, Second Corps commander, in Fall 1863. Because of his experience on July 1, Ewell was aware of the location and probably the name for Cemetery Hill. As for July 2:

Early in the morning, I received a communication from the commanding general, the tenor of which was that he intended the main attack to be made by the First Corps, on our [the army's] right, and wished me, as soon as their guns opened, to make a diversion in their favor, to be converted into a real attack if an opportunity offered.²⁵

However, the day wore on until his corps attacked near sunset, of which he recorded:

Before beginning my advance, I had sent a staff officer to the division of the Third Corps, on my right, which proved to be General Pender's, to find out what they were to do. He reported the division under command of General [James] Lane, who succeeded Pender, wounded, and who sent word back that the only orders he had received from General Pender were that he was to attack if a favorable opportunity presented.²⁶

Pender was regarded highly in this army: in his full report, Lee listed him first among the generals who died in the battle, and he merited a separate paragraph therein:

The loss of Major-General Pender is severely felt by the army and the country. He served with this army from the beginning of the war, and took a distinguished part in its engagements. Wounded on several occasions, he never left his command in action until he received the injury that resulted in his death. His promise and usefulness as an officer were only equaled by the purity and excellence of his private life.²⁷

Ewell's account of Pender's order to Lane is interesting. General Pender was wounded while visiting the section held by Anderson's Division, presumably to inquire why the echelon attack was stalled because it was close to sunset and his (Pender's) brigades were to step off after Anderson's. Pender transferred command to General James Lane, but the order passed to Lane (as Ewell reported) seems not to indicate a coordinated attack along the entire line toward Cemetery Hill; once again, a general has orders to attack "if a favorable opportunity presented." The use of this phrase in Lee's orders to the Second and Third Corps commanders plus Ewell's reporting that the First Corps would execute the main attack offer more indication that no grand plan concentrating on Cemetery Hill existed. This is also an indication of poor communication on the part of Army headquarters to subordinates. No one seemed to know what the person next to him was supposed to do.

The fifth example is from Colonel (later General) Armistead Long, trained as an artilleryman, and Lee's military secretary during the campaign. In this capacity, he was present for many of Lee's discussions with his commanders; however, in his position, he

was required to file no official report. His *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee: His Military and Personal History* appeared in 1886 and offered a uniquely personal account of his commander during the war. He describes the terrain:

The town of Gettysburg, nestling in a small valley, is surrounded by numerous low ridges making various angles with each other. The most important of them is the one situated about a mile south-west, known as Cemetery Ridge. It is terminated by two conical mounds about four miles apart. The one to the south is designated the Round Top. The one to the north is called Culp's Hill.

Immediately after the defeat of the First and Eleventh corps Cemetery Ridge was selected as the Federal position. Nearer the town is a second ridge, nearly parallel to, and about a thousand yards west of, the Cemetery Ridge. This ridge during the battle formed the Confederate center. From its southern extremity springs obliquely a spur extending almost on a line with the Round Top. This naturally formed the Confederate right.²⁸

Long's references to Cemetery Ridge as both the Federal position after the first day's retreat and as parallel to Seminary Ridge indicate that he was treating both the (modern day) hill and ridge as different topographical features, and militarily they can be treated as such. This is yet another indicator of the variability of nomenclature for those features.

It is also true that by 1886, articles and books about the battle had been written, in which the separate landscape features or hill and ridge were delineated. An example is the history of the battle by the Comte de Paris, who served with the Union Army. Long would have had access to those sources.

On the evening of July 1, Long wrote that Lee discussed the tactical situation with him and asked Long for his opinion on attacking without cavalry, at the time more than a day away from Gettysburg. Long suggested that because the Federals appeared to have only two or three corps concentrated at Gettysburg, it would be best to attack them before reinforcements arrived:

An attack in force on the enemy before he could concentrate his army was very promising of success, and it was with this purpose fully determined upon in the general's mind that the events of that day ended for the Confederate army.²⁹

At an early hour on the morning of the 2d the writer (Colonel Long) [his clarification] was directed to examine and verify the position of the Confederate artillery. He accordingly examined the whole line from right to left, and gave the necessary instructions for its effective service...The object was to dislodge the Federal force, that had retreated after its defeat [on July 1] to the position known as Cemetery Ridge, before it could be reinforced to any considerable extent. By doing so Lee hoped to be able to defeat the Federal army in detail before it could be concentrated.³⁰

His account continues with plans for July 3, after Culp's Hill had been secured by

Federal troops near mid-morning:

This change in the condition of affairs rendered necessary a reconsideration of the military problem, and induced General Lee, after making a reconnaissance of the enemy's position, to change his plan of assault. Cemetery Ridge, from Round top to Culp's Hill, was at every point strongly occupied by federal infantry and artillery, and was evidently a very formidable position. There was, however, a weak point upon which an attack could be made with a reasonable prospect of success. This was where the ridge, sloping westward, formed the depression through which the Emmitsburg road passes. Perceiving that by forcing the Federal lines at that point and turning toward Cemetery Hill the right would be taken in flank and the remainder would be neutralized, as its fire would be as destructive to friend as foe, and considering that the losses of the Federal Army in the preceding two days must weaken its cohesion and consequently diminish its power of resistance, General Lee was determined to attack at that point, and the execution of it was assigned to Longstreet, while instructions were given to Hill and Ewell to support him, and a hundred and forty-five guns were massed to cover the advance of the attacking column.³¹

It is clear from Long's account that on July 2 Lee was attentive in his planning by examining the Federal line and asking Long's opinion and ordering him to report on the status of Confederate artillery; this is to be expected from Lee. It seems also that for that day, Lee's objective was to dislodge the Federals from Cemetery Ridge before they could be reinforced. However, Long presents a different picture for July 3. By mid-morning, the Federals had occupied Culp's Hill, and Longstreet had not attacked and was moving

his divisions to attack around the Federal left flank. Lee re-planned the attack to include Pickett's Division with support from Hill and Ewell and with massed artillery support.

Three elements of this account should be highlighted. First, Long understood the difference between Cemetery Hill and Cemetery Ridge. Second, nowhere does he discuss a grand plan which included General Stuart's cavalry to attack the fleeing Federals from the east. Third, close inspection of the implied timeline in Long's account of July 3 leaves little time for any planning for a meticulously planned attack per the topic authors. Lee had to decide on another plan quickly if he wanted it to execute that day.

The sixth example is from Colonel (later General) Edward. P. Alexander, master artilleryist, and commander of a reserve artillery battalion in Longstreet's First Corps. He coordinated artillery support for Longstreet's Corps for the July 2 and July 3 attacks.

His *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative* was published in 1907. Careful review of this memoir reveals in his three chapters on Gettysburg, that he mentions Cemetery Hill many times, but nowhere does he state it as the objective of the entire army. As with Lee's report, most of his references to Cemetery Hill are in descriptions of the terrain, Confederate lines, or Federal positions. Statements about Cemetery Hill are (italics are Alexander's):

The shank of the fish-hook ran north, nearly straight, for about two miles from Little Round Top to Cemetery Hill, where the bend began. The bend was not uniform and regular, but presented a sharp salient at the north, and on the east a deep re-entrant around which the line swept to reach Culp's Hill, and pass around it nearly in an S.

This salient upon Cemetery Hill offered *the only hopeful point of attack upon the enemy's entire line*, as will more fully appear in the accounts of the different efforts made at various places during the battle.³²

Two points stand out from Alexander's account. First, his reference to Cemetery Hill as a "salient" and "the only hopeful point of attack" represent his opinion, after 40 years, of what should have been the objective of the attack. Second, Alexander was not part of the discussion between Lee and Longstreet, and he acted only according to his orders from Longstreet as to the direction of the fire.

Summarizing the accounts of the six participants produces these points:

1. Lee and his subordinates studied the topography intently and became familiar with its features although there were inconsistencies in what they called those features. This is understandable considering that none of them had been there before.

2. Lee and his subordinates respected the strength of the Federal positions. What they did not know is exactly how many Federal corps had arrived and were in or behind the lines, owing, in part, to lack of intelligence that should have been provided by Stuart and mounted scouts from his division. From this lack of intelligence, a principal point here is that *what they know of the line, they know from peering through binoculars across the field from Seminary Ridge*. The importance of this last sentence will be covered below.

3. Lee appears to have had a plan for his attacks from Seminary Ridge on July 2 and 3, and it appears to involve what was *called* Cemetery Hill, although none of the participants cited above state that Stuart's cavalry was to attack from the east in a grand finale to catch fleeing Federals. An early proponent of Stuart's attack from the east toward Cemetery Ridge was Major Henry McClellan, Stuart's adjutant-general. He wrote in 1885:

Stuart's object was to gain position where he would protect the left of Ewell's corps, and would also be able to observe the enemy's rear and attack it in case the Confederate assault on the Federal lines were successful. He proposed, if opportunity offered, to make a diversion which might aid the Confederate infantry to carry the heights held by the Federal army.³³

McClellan's statement of Stuart's mission appears in no official accounts. Carhart refers to Major McClellan often in *Lost Triumph*.

4. Lee consulted with his commanders individually (but not together) more than once and even asked Colonel Long for his opinion on his plan. There is not a hint of carelessness in any of Lee's actions; however, one must ask whether Lee had enough time to plan his attacks. It is also uncertain how clear Lee's plan was to his subordinates.

LATER COMMENTARY

Having sampled participants, it is now time to review commentary by prominent historians on the topic. There are, of course, a plethora of books and articles on Gettysburg, so a survey of the entire population is impossible, but a sample of prominent historians and works should be sufficient to offer an idea of professional evaluations of General Lee and his plan in the battle. These historians are of high repute and their works held in high regard as classics. They are presented in rough order of production or publication.

The first examples are from Douglas Southall Freeman and his two classic Civil War works, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* and *Lee's Lieutenants*, published respectively in 1934 and 1942. Freeman provides the time-honored view of Lee's noble planning during the battle and his reaction as events unfolded. On the morning of July 2, Lee was still unsure how much of the Federal army had been reinforced at Gettysburg. He thought that it had not all concentrated, and after Longstreet made his case again for a maneuver around the Federal left, "Lee still believed that the one practicable course was to attack the Federals

on Cemetery Ridge at once and to rout them before they could complete their concentration.”³⁴

After this, he held his conference with Longstreet and Hill in which he discussed his plan of attack. After hearing that the morning reconnaissance revealed no Federals near the Round Tops:

The decision of Lee to attack the enemy was confirmed. If the Confederates could launch an oblique assault North of the Two Round Tops, could get astride Cemetery Ridge at its lowest point there, and could sweep up the ridge, the Federals could be driven from it! That was Lee’s conclusion.³⁵

(The “lowest point” between Cemetery Ridge and Little Round Top is where the Federal III Corps was ordered to deploy and where Sickles *did not* wish to remain.) It appears to Freeman that Longstreet’s mission was to clear the Federals from Cemetery Ridge before they could concentrate. After this morning meeting, Lee rode to meet with Ewell about his corps’ attack on Cemetery and Culp’s Hills.³⁶

On the morning of July 3, Lee again heard Longstreet’s proposal to swing south around the Union Army. Lee again rejected it, indicating his desire to renew the attack against Cemetery Ridge with Longstreet’s entire First Corps, now that General George Pickett’s division had arrived the previous afternoon. General Longstreet continued his opposition, stating that the divisions of Hood and McLaws were needed to protect his right flank and were in no condition to execute another assault after their casualties from the previous day. At this point (*italics added for later discussion*):

Lee believed that his plan was practicable and *that a general assault along the right held out the highest promise of success*. His army had never yet failed to carry a Federal position when he had been able to throw his full strength against it. Only when his assault had been delivered with part of his forces – as at Malvern Hill – had he ever failed. But now, in the face of Longstreet’s continued

opposition, he probably reasoned that if Longstreet did not have faith in the plan it would be worse than dangerous to entrust the assault to his troops alone.³⁷

Lee then agreed to keep Hood and McLaws in place on Longstreet's right and assigned Heth's division and two brigades of Pender's division from Hill's Corps to attack with Pickett. Despite Longstreet's depression about leading the attack, Lee still felt confident in his soldiers. Lee rode with Longstreet back toward the center to study the ground and check the placement of the artillery. Lee eventually rode back and forth along the line with Longstreet twice to ensure that all infantry preparations were as complete as possible.³⁸ (Lee's constant checking on infantry and artillery might give pause to those who blame Longstreet's preparations for the failure of the attack.) Longstreet would lead the attack, and he could call on Hill for support from Anderson's Division if needed. General Hill wanted his entire corps to participate in the attack, but Lee told him that his corps was his "only reserve."³⁹

Freeman suggests that Lee knew exactly what he wished to accomplish on July 3 and planned meticulously and checked personally whatever he could. This might have been spurred by Longstreet's behavior and Hill's apparent illness, but regardless the cause, he did it. Freeman states also that Lee thought that an attack initiated against the Union left (James Longstreet's Corps) was his best chance to dislodge the Federals from Cemetery Hill. Finally, nowhere in his chapter on the charge does Freeman state that Cemetery Hill was the target of a combined assault of infantry and Stuart's cavalry from the east.

The second example is from Edwin B. Coddington, whose work *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, published in 1968, is one of the classic histories of the battle. Coddington quotes Longstreet's assertion in stating that Lee never reached

conclusions impulsively and labored on his battle plans even down to the smallest detail.⁴⁰

Once he decided to stay in the town and give battle, he pondered on how to proceed with his attacks and he had separate discussions with many of his generals.⁴¹

On Lee's plan for Longstreet for July 2, Coddington writes:

As far as can be determined, Lee's offensive move against the Union left flank was to comprise two steps, one preparatory to the other: first, the seizure of good artillery positions at the Peach Orchard and the other high ground three-quarters of a mile west of Big Round Top; and second, an oblique attack on Cemetery Ridge covered by artillery fire from these advanced locations.⁴²

On Ewell's attack on July 2nd, he writes, "Though the struggle for Cemetery Hill was one of the more dramatic and memorable events in the three days of bloody encounter between the two armies, its military importance has perhaps been overemphasized."⁴³

The third example is from Harry W. Pfanz, whose 1987 work *Gettysburg: The Second Day* who offers this interpretation of Lee's thoughts on the night of July 1:

Although Lee was determined to attack the next day, he seemed undecided still about how the attack should be made. He wondered to Colonel Long if he should attack before Stuart's cavalry arrived. Even if such an attack were successful, the Confederates might not be able to reap the harvest of victory without the cavalry's help. Colonel Long observed that it seemed best not to wait: they did not know when the cavalry would arrive, and the enemy had two or three corps in their front (by that time there were in fact four). Reassured somewhat by the logic of his able military secretary, General Lee returned to his tent to sleep.⁴⁴

Pfanz offers no additional analysis other than that Lee was calm and deliberate after this discussion which concerned only the use of cavalry in the next day's battle plan. This was the only question settled at that meeting, nothing more. (Pfanz never wrote a book on the third day of the battle, a loss for Civil War historiography.)

The fourth example is from Allen C. Guelzo, whose *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*, published in 2013, offers subtle adulation of Lee's plan. Upon Lee's hearing the spy Harrison's report of the movements and locations, Guelzo writes:

This confirmed what Lee already suspected: that the Army of the Potomac was shaking itself into pieces that Lee could turn upon and beat one by one, with all the odds in his favor. If he succeeded in "crushing Meade's army, Philadelphia will be at his mercy, or he may come down on Washington in its rear."⁴⁵

Guelzo continues by discussing July 2, after Lee called Longstreet and Hill together for an early morning conference:

Lee began laying out the plan he had devised—as soon as Longstreet's two divisions were in hand, they would turn to their right and march south, following a route that Captain Johnston would provide upon his return. This would place them south and west of Cemetery Hill, and there they would wheel left and, facing north and into the rear of Cemetery Hill, "attack up the Emmettsburg [*sic*] road."⁴⁶

After describing the proposed actions of Longstreet and Ewell in destroying the Federal army, he closes his discussion:

After that, Lee would be free to turn the entirety of the victorious Army of Northern Virginia either south or east to meet and crush in similar fashion the next batch of Union infantry to come blundering into his path.⁴⁷

Concerning the morning of July 3, Guelzo writes:

Robert E. Lee had made up his mind what course to follow...Climbing up to the open cupola of Pennsylvania College, Lee saw nothing which suggested that he shouldn't hit the federals again in the same fashion. The "partial successes" of July 2nd "determined me to continue the assault the next day." Moreover, Dick Ewell's foothold on the south peak of Culp's Hill "was such as to lead to the belief that he would ultimately dislodge the enemy," and so "the general plan of attack was unchanged."⁴⁸

The fifth example is from Gettysburg Park Ranger and Historian John Heiser. The authors of this paper have had the benefit of discourse with Ranger Heiser on this topic. In discussing the concept of this paper with him in October 2016, he offered this advice about

contentions that Lee observed and evidently indicated to General Longstreet that a section of Cemetery ridge was the “weakest” sector of the Federal line: “Just remember this--when you stand on Seminary Ridge and look at the Union line, that is exactly all that Lee could see.” In other words, with no cavalry to scout (and not even *attempting* to use available horsemen as substitutes), and observing *up* the slopes using binoculars, Lee had no special insight into any details of the Federal line.

Heiser continued in a later Email:

“I think Lee's intention for the attack on July 3 has been somewhat over analyzed, mostly in the nature of the chaotically weak planning and communication of orders that day.

“Ultimately, Lee could only judge on any weakness in the Union line from horseback or at eye level and possibly not have a full understanding of the strength of the Second Corps’ position without taking further time to get reports from scouts, etc. He simply did not have enough time to wait for further information when time (was a factor) and hopefully throwing Meade off balance with the fighting at Culp’s Hill as a distraction from Longstreet’s assault against the opposite side or Union left center.”⁴⁹

Time is an aspect of Lee’s planning that is often mentioned in the context of “urgency,” i.e., that Lee could not remain stationary forever in a northern state (foraging requires movement) and had to act quickly. (“Urgency” is a much better descriptor than the commonly used “desperate,” because the latter often denotes hopelessness or rashness, and there is no indication that Lee exhibited those traits during the campaign.) The attack would be “now or never.” This subject of urgency and time is not new as Douglas Southall Freeman also noted:

Of exterior factors, the first, which deserves more emphasis than it has received, was the limitation imposed on Lee’s action by the factor of time. The campaign was fought while the Army was living off the country and was without supply lines to Virginia. Much of the collection of supplies had to be undertaken with little cavalry.⁵⁰

In addition, modern battlefield maps indicate Cemetery Hill and Cemetery Ridge as two distinct landscape features. The Confederates, unfamiliar with the area, knew that the landform before them was called “Cemetery,” but differ in their nomenclature as to its parts, as noted in the participants’ accounts above. Heiser stated:

As to the discussion on the July 3, what I’ve felt strongly about is what Lee was able to observe of the Union line from Seminary Ridge, be it near his headquarters or near the McMillan Farm, the latter where he studied the Cemetery Hill position late on July 1, or Spangler Woods. From any of the locations offered him, Cemetery Hill is one large mass and not subdivided into a hill separate from the elongated ridge as we look at maps of the field today. The northern extension of Cemetery Ridge, the area from the copse of trees to the Brian Farm and Ziegler’s Grove, appears to be the southern end of Cemetery Hill when viewed from Seminary Ridge. That is all Lee could really see from any of the positions on Seminary Ridge he was known to frequent during the battle. Next time you’re in the park, stop at the National Guard Armory on West Confederate Avenue, the North Carolina and Virginia monuments and you’ll see exactly what I refer to; that is what Lee saw. Even from the Peach Orchard, Cemetery Hill and the northern section of Cemetery Ridge look like one and the same, which explains why E.P. Alexander refers to the mass as “the cemetery” (he did not know anything about the geographic location of Evergreen Cemetery at the time of the battle) and why Lee refers to Cemetery Hill in his reports rather than directing the plan of attack to “Cemetery Ridge” or the southern extension of the hill. In his official report, he does not refer to Cemetery Hill at all regarding Longstreet’s Assault, only the “enemy’s left.”⁵¹

The scope and creativity of Lee’s plan for Pickett’s Charge must be put into perspective. On July 2, he had artillery and infantry and he used them; on July 3, he also had artillery, infantry, and cavalry, and he used them. His tactical attack plan on both days was nothing groundbreaking. The *attack in echelon* had first appeared with ancient Greek armies and a concentrated artillery bombardment prior to an infantry assault was a common military tactic magnified on a grand scale by Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Planning an attack to hit the same point from two directions or using infantry, cavalry, and artillery simultaneously requires careful calculation of the forces available for each day’s attack,

something that an experienced army commander like Lee would be expected to do. However, none of this necessarily makes Lee's plan "brilliant" or a "tactical notch above the French general," as Phillip Tucker claims in his book on Pickett's Charge.⁵²

Thus, the topic authors attempt to support the idea that Lee's plan was impeccable and thoroughly prepared, agreeing with Freeman in this respect. As suggested by Coddington, this was not the case. Lee produced the best plans he could, but they were limited by resources and time, and they failed on both days.

Summarizing the discussions by these historians produces these points:

1. Lee appears to have had definite plans for the attacks on July 2 and 3. In addition, he studied his tactical problems intently, and was calm and deliberate. On both days, however, circumstances forced him to abandon his original plan and order another course, indicating that he was adaptable, but this characteristic of Lee is well known. Lee was aggressive, not impulsive, and certainly not desperate.

2. Allowing for variations in landscape feature identities by different participants, the primary Confederate attacks on July 2 and then on July 3 seem to have concentrated on the Federal position on Cemetery Ridge with diversionary support from Ewell on the opposite end of the Federal battle line. There was no transformation by Lee on July 3 of this into a "general plan" of convergence on Cemetery Ridge that included Stuart's cavalry.

3. Lee was constrained by poor intelligence and by what he could observe of the Federal line. In addition, his army was fighting in a Northern state at the end of a long supply line and this added an urgency to Lee's decision making. He felt that he could not delay his attack. Lee adapted as best he could, but the resulting plans were limited in scope and preparation, and neither provocative nor brilliant.

It is fair to conclude that General Lee never lost his aggressive spirit or his equipoise, was careful and purposeful given time constraints, gave orders he firmly believed would succeed, and personally inspected preparations made for the attacks he envisioned. He exhibited an ability to quickly formulate a plan under duress and his generals had served him well in previous battles, but that was the past and somehow in this battle, both proved insufficient. The explanation that the Army of Northern Virginia lost the battle *solely* because Lee's wonderful plans were spoiled by ineffective leadership of his generals does not stand up under closer examination either.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the combined themes of three recent books on the battle of Gettysburg. Positing that previous historians have erred, the topic authors (Bowden and Ward, Carhart, and Tucker) offer variations on the topographic objective of Lee's attacks on July 2 and 3, and contend that in some way, Lee was at his tactical best during the battle, but his generals failed him. The paper discussed Lee's demeanor and plans from the views of the reports and memoirs of Lee and other participants, from four prominent authors, and from the National Park historian at Gettysburg, for which conclusions appear below. One more item needs to be addressed, however.

Eventually one must ask: If the Army of Northern Virginia lost the battle, why the concern over burnishing the reputation of its commander? The topic authors declare their deep concern that Lee's reputation has been somehow diminished or tainted by honest historical discussion of his performance at Gettysburg. Per the topic authors, somehow

this great battle had been “misunderstood” by many prominent historians. For instance, per Bowden and Ward (*italics in original*):

Many writers and most students of the Civil War today believe that Gettysburg was the nadir of Lee’s career; that his performance in Adams County during the first few days of July 1863 evidenced an overly combative and headstrong general who could not stem his impulse to throw his men away by the thousands in frontal attacks...Lee, it is often said, issued discretionary orders to his key subordinates at critical moments—and lost control of his army; once engaged, the ailing commanding general displayed a “passive” form of personal generalship while asking of his men the impossible...Lee’s decisions doomed his legions to defeat. Most of this is simply *assumed* to be true.⁵³

Not to be outdone, Carhart offers his version of the “misunderstanding”:

The conventional wisdom over the last century and a half has been that Lee risked everything that day—a much-needed stunning victory over the Army of the Potomac in Pennsylvania, the survival of his own army, even, yes, the very life of the Confederacy—on a foolish attack by nine of his forty-three combat brigades launched against ranks of riflemen and clusters of cannon awaiting them in the Union line.⁵⁴

Phillip Tucker offers a similar opinion concentrating on July 3 (note use of the adjective “desperate”):

In truth and contrary to conventional wisdom and time-worn stereotypes about the alleged folly of Lee’s final assault at Gettysburg, Pickett’s Charge...was Lee’s best and last opportunity to save the Confederacy’s life: one final desperate effort that came far closer to succeeding than generally realized.⁵⁵

This situation with Lee at Gettysburg is rare in historiography in that it might be the only battle where some historians expend considerable ink justifying the actions of the losing general, great though he might otherwise be considered. Great commanders have been defeated with little diminishment to their military reputation, and there is little effort spent to artificially enhance their performance in those losses. Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, General Erwin Rommel, and General Georgi Zhukov are examples of commanders who suffered grievous

defeats but whose reputations remain respectable. It might appear that Lee is in good company; for certain, Lee's reputation is deservedly durable despite the defeat and should require no special treatment or defense. In addition, unlike criticism of other Civil War generals, criticism of Lee is normally restrained and polite.

However, Lee was *defeated* at Gettysburg. In each case above, just as with Lee at Gettysburg, the commander had his reasons for pursuing his chosen course, but history also records that in some battles they failed. Although there is evidence that many of Lee's subordinates underperformed in the battle for several reasons, Lee *was in command*. If it is fair to say that *Lee* won at Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville, as is often done, it is equally fair to say that Lee *lost* at Gettysburg. In response to someone making excuses for a loss, National Football League (NFL) coach Bill Parcells said, "You are what your record says you are."⁵⁶ Lee was the commander and victor on the Peninsula, at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, but as commander, he lost at Gettysburg. That is the record.

From the participants and historians, several simple conclusions can be derived from the analysis presented in this paper:

1. Lee studied the Federal position and planned carefully throughout the battle. He never lost his aggressive spirit or his equipoise.
2. Lee formulated plans limited by time, resources, the lack of fresh reconnaissance, real-time events, and the abilities of his corps commanders. He exhibited an ability to quickly formulate a plan under duress. His plans were aggressive, but not original. Care must be taken to avoid ascribing to Lee more capability than he had relative to viewing the Federal line from Seminary Ridge, as Ranger Heiser contends.

3. Official battle reports exhibit variations in the nomenclature on the target of the attacks on July 2 and 3. This disparity among the participants is understandable because they were unfamiliar with the area.

4. It appears that Cemetery Ridge was the target on July 2 and 3. It also appears that there was no plan for a coordinated attack on Cemetery Hill on July 3 that included Stuart's attack as one part of a coordinated plan. No report or account indicates anything approaching a complicated plan with Cemetery Hill as its objective.

General Robert E. Lee's military reputation is not in jeopardy as the topic authors fear, suggest, and defend where no defense is required. He is one of the great generals in American history and his property at Arlington is the site of sacred ground. Lee's reputation is far better than those of the army and navy commanders at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, who were relieved of command and forced to retire. Therefore, the effort of the topic authors to furbish the Confederate defeat and Lee's reputation, can be both alluring and misleading for the unprepared.

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