

**THE POINTLESS CRITICISM OF GENERAL MEADE’S
MEETING WITH HIS GENERALS ON THE NIGHT OF
JULY 2, 1863**

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On the night of July 2, 1863, Union General George Meade, commanding the Army of the Potomac (AOP), called a meeting with his corps commanders after two days’ hard fighting. He has been criticized for this ever since. For example, almost 100 years after the battle, Glenn Tucker in *High Tide at Gettysburg* wrote, “Sometime about 11:00 p.m. Meade called a council of corps commanders to review the fortunes of the army and recommend the course for the next day. That he called the council was evidence of his uncertainty.”¹

This was not a tactical or logistical error or any other kind of military error that might be worthy of criticism. It was a simple meeting with a legitimate purpose for an army commander—to learn the size of his army after two days of hard fighting. The Union Army under Meade would go on to win the battle, but this meeting became a basis for numerous accusations of caution and hesitation against Meade by generals and historians alike even long after the battle, such as that by Tucker.

This paper will analyze this meeting in five areas: 1) Meade’s first five days in command, 2) the meeting itself, 3) the fallout from the meeting, 4) Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s meetings during the same five days, and 5) discussion and conclusions.

However, some disclaimers are warranted. All discussion of generals in this paper is 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 *relative to the battle*. None of the points presented is intended to suggest that either 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.

BACKGROUND

By the beginning of June 1863, the Civil War was over two years old. Vicksburg, Mississippi, had been under siege by Federal forces under General Ulysses Grant for about two weeks, and this had to be addressed. Conventional wisdom has held that to take pressure from Vicksburg, General Lee was to take his Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) north through Maryland into Pennsylvania to threaten its capitol, Harrisburg, and possibly Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. The goal was to draw the Federal Army from Virginia and defeat it in a climactic battle that would end the war. Along the way, the Confederates would forage liberally on its march, paying for its booty with Confederate scrip.

The ANV had been most successful in the past year under Lee, driving the Federals from the Peninsula, and defeating them at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and most recently Chancellorsville, suffering its only setback at Antietam the previous September.

Its spirits were high, and a confident invincibility coursed through the ranks from the commander to the lowest private. In contrast, the Federals in the Army of the Potomac and the short-lived Army of Virginia, endured each loss and stubbornly returned for battle after battle, the army fighting well, but suffering from ineffective commanders.

In mid-June the ANV moved out of its Virginia camps into the Shenandoah Valley. The Army of the Potomac, General Joseph Hooker commanding, left its camps later in the month and followed an inner course to the Confederates, keeping itself between the ANV and Washington and Baltimore. Hooker and President Abraham Lincoln disagreed as to the status of Federal forces in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, with Lincoln refusing to place them under Hooker's command. Hooker resigned over this, Lincoln accepted his resignation, and selected another general to command the army. That general was George Meade.

MEADE'S FIRST FIVE DAYS IN COMMAND

Although Lincoln had considered other generals for command of the AOP, those candidates became irrelevant in the early morning of June 28. Meade was awakened in his tent near Frederick, Maryland, by a staff officer from General Henry Halleck, General-in-Chief, ordering him to command the army.² In a letter to his wife, Margareta, dated June 29, he described what happened:

Yesterday morning, at 3 A. M., I was aroused from my sleep by an officer from Washington entering my tent, and after waking me up, saying he had come to give me trouble. At first I thought that it was either to relieve or arrest me, and promptly replied to him, that my conscience was clear, void of offense towards any man; I was prepared for his bad news. He then handed me a communication to read; which I found was an order relieving Hooker from the command and assigning me to it.³

Halleck's order set the stage in the first paragraph, "You will receive with this the order of the President placing you in command of the Army of the Potomac. Considering the circumstances, no one ever received a more important command." This is a direct and daunting opening, and with the Confederates deep in Pennsylvania, clearly the truth. Although Meade had proven himself a brave and capable commander, one could not blame him, or anyone for that matter, for being floored by the magnitude of *this* command at *this* time and place. Halleck ordered Meade to protect the Capitol and Baltimore, and stated, "Should General Lee move upon either of these places, it is expected that you will either anticipate him or arrive with him, so as to give him battle."⁴

After meeting with Hooker, Meade telegraphed a response to Halleck. This message offers no hint of uncertainty or hesitation in his purpose: "I can only now say that it appears to me I must move towards the Susquehanna, keeping Washington and Baltimore well covered, and if the enemy is checked in his attempt to cross the Susquehanna, or if he turns towards Baltimore, to give him battle."⁵ It should be noted that the phrase "give battle" indicates an intention to fight and even attack.

Meade studied the positions of the army's seven corps and made his plans for their advancement. The orders he sent to his commanders should be read in full:

The army will march to-morrow as follows:

4 A. M. The 1st Corps, Major General [John] Reynolds, by Lewistown and Mechanicstown to Emmettsburg [*sic*], keeping the left of the road from Frederick to Lewistown, between J. P. Cramer's and where the road branches to Utica and Cregerstown, to enable the 11th Corps to march parallel to it.

4 A. M. The 11th Corps, Major General [Oliver] Howard, by Utica and Cregerstown to Emmettsburg [*sic*].

4 A. M. The 12th Corps, by Ceresville, Walkersville and Woodsborough, to Taneytown.

4 A. M. The 2d Corps, by Johnsville, Liberty and Union to Frizzleburg.

4 A. M. The 3d Corps, by Woodsborough and Middleburg (from Walkersville), to Taneytown.

The 5th Corps will follow the 2d Corps, moving at 8 A. M., camping at Union.

The 6th Corps, by roads to the right of the 5th and 2d Corps, to New Windsor.

The Reserve Artillery will precede the 12th Corps, at 4 A. M., and camp between Middleburg and Taneytown.

General [Henry] Lockwood, with his command, will report to and march with the 12th Corps.

The Engineers and bridge-trains will follow the 5th Corps.

Headquarters will move at 8 A. M. and be to-morrow night at Middleburg.

Headquarter's train will move by Ceresville and Woodsborough to Middleburg, at 8 A. M.

The cavalry will guard the right and left flanks and the rear, and give the Commanding General information of the movement and of the enemy in front. Corps commanders and commanders of detached brigades will report by a staff officer their positions to-morrow night and on all marches in future.

The corps moving on the different lines will keep up communication from time to time, if necessary. They will camp in position, and guard their camps. Corps commanders will send out scouts in their front, as occasion offers, to bring in information. Strong exertions are required and must be made to prevent straggling. By command of Major General Meade.⁶

This message also contains nothing to indicate uncertainty or hesitancy.

In the June 29 letter to Margaretta, Meade wrote also, "I am moving at once against Lee, whom I am in hopes [General Darius] Couch will at least check for a few days; if so, a battle will decide the fate of our country and our cause."⁷ Thus, in his first official and unofficial communications as army commander, it appears as if Meade is describing a decision already made, that is, to chase Lee and fight.

On June 30 Meade received word that the Confederates appeared to be converging on Gettysburg. He sent circulars to his commanders that included news of Confederate movements and orders for the march and pending battle. In one circular, he wrote:

Corps commanders will hold their commands in readiness at a moment's notice, and upon receiving orders, to march against the enemy. Their trains (ammunition trains excepted) must be parked in the rear of the place of concentration. Ammunition wagons and ambulances will alone be permitted to accompany the

troops. The men must be provided with three-days' rations in haversacks, and with sixty rounds of ammunition in the boxes and upon the person.⁸

And in another message covering the upcoming march of July 1, he wrote:

The General relies upon every commander to put his column in the lightest possible order. The Telegraph Corps to work east from Hanover, repairing the line, and all commanders to work repairing the line in their vicinity between Gettysburg and Hanover

Staff officers to report daily from each corps, and with orderlies to leave for orders. Prompt information to be sent into headquarters at all times. All ready to move to the attack at any moment.

(...)

Vigilance, energy and prompt response to the orders from headquarters are necessary, and the personal attention of corps commanders must be given to reduction of impedimenta.⁹

First, it appears again that Meade is unequivocally ordering the army to prepare for battle.

Since he took command of the army, his sole concern was moving it forward. Second, Meade has established that he intended that communications between his corps commanders and his headquarters be a two-way street.

In a letter to Margaretta written on June 30, his third calendar day in command, Meade wrote, "I continue well, but much oppressed with a sense of responsibility and the magnitude of the great interests entrusted to me. Of course, in time I will become accustomed to this."¹⁰ It should come as no surprise that Meade is "oppressed" with the national responsibility thrust on his shoulders. This might also be the result of knowing that many of the officers under his command outranked him (by date of rank), an uncomfortable situation in the military.

Late on June 30, Meade received reports that Lee had withdrawn from the Susquehanna River and was concentrating his forces. Aware that the two armies might

come into contact and not being able to predict the exact location of such contact, he decided to locate a possible position to meet the enemy. On the march, he ordered his engineers to examine local topographies to determine such a location. This line was along Pipe Creek in northern Maryland, and it was selected as a contingency. A circular was written to all commanders informing them of this line with instructions as to routes and final positions along the line.¹¹ Excerpts (omitting sections regarding directions and position) from the Pipe Creek Circular dated July 1, 1863 follow:

From information received the commanding general is satisfied that the object of the movement of the army in this direction has been accomplished, viz: the relief of Harrisburg and the prevention of the enemy's intended invasion of Philadelphia beyond the Susquehanna.

It is no longer his intention to assume the offensive until the enemy's movements or position should render such an operation certain of success. If the enemy assume the offensive and attack, it is his intention, after holding them in check sufficiently long to withdraw the trains and other impediments, to withdraw the army from its present position, and form line of battle with the left resting in the neighborhood of Middleburg, and the right at Manchester, the general direction being that of Pipe creek.

(...)

The time for falling back can only be developed by circumstances. Whenever such circumstances arise as would seem to indicate the necessity for falling back and assuming this general line indicated, notice of such movement will at once be communicated to these headquarters and to all adjoining corps commanders.

(...)

This order is communicated that a general plan, perfectly understood by all, may be had for receiving attack if made in strong force upon any portion of our present position. Developments may cause the commanding general to assume the offensive from his present positions¹²

It should be clear from these excerpts that this document describes a back-up plan, one that he conceived and executed on the march northward. There is nothing wrong with

a contingency, and it is a reasonable precaution if one is available. What was the contingency? That Lee might attack first. It is also obvious that Meade is trying his best to inform his commanders of his intentions, and those intentions do not include retreat unless dictated by “circumstances.” Most important, he sent this circular on July 1 *after* he ordered his commanders toward Gettysburg on a war footing, and the message contains nothing definitive about turning back.

On July 1, Meade continued to send orders to corps commanders informing them of Confederate movements and ordering moves for the army. In the morning, General Winfield Hancock, commander of II Corps, stopped by Meade’s headquarters and reported to him. Meade explained the military situation to him and stated his intentions to fight a battle with Lee whether at Gettysburg or wherever practicable. Meade then received a message from Reynolds, whose I Corps was fighting in Gettysburg, that he intended to “fight them inch by inch, and if driven into the town, I will barricade the streets and hold them back as long as possible.” To this Meade responded to the courier, “Good! that is just like Reynolds; he will hold on to the bitter end.”¹³

About one in the afternoon in Taneytown, Maryland, Meade received news that Reynolds was killed. He realized immediately that he must send someone to the front capable of replacing Reynolds. Meade chose Hancock, a close friend with whom he had shared his plans earlier, and dispatched him from Taneytown (where his II Corps had stopped to rest) to Gettysburg to take command of the fighting, to evaluate the topography, and to advise him as to the practicability of continuing the fight at that place. His order to Hancock was issued at 1:10 p.m., just ten minutes after he heard of Reynolds’s death, and directed Hancock to assume command if Reynolds was indeed dead,

...you assume command of the corps there assembled, viz., the Eleventh, First, and Third, at Emmettsburg [*sic*]. If you think the ground and position there a better one to fight a battle under existing circumstances, you will so advise the General, and he will order all the troops up. You know the General's views...¹⁴

Hancock was delayed because he spent part of his trip to Gettysburg in an ambulance studying maps of the area.¹⁵ He arrived on the field after 3:30 p.m. (the exact time is uncertain), conferred with General Oliver Howard, and took command on Cemetery Hill: Hancock certainly did know Meade's views. By 4:30, Meade sent an order to General John Sedgwick to move his VI Corps to Taneytown that night. He also sent orders to V and XII Corps to move to Gettysburg."¹⁶

At six, Meade sent a dispatch to Hancock (with a copy to Howard) indicating that he (Meade) left a division of III Corps in Emmitsburg to protect that approach. It continued:

It [III Corps] can be ordered up to-night, if required. It seems to me that we have so concentrated, that a battle at Gettysburg is now forced on us, and that if we can get up our people and attack with our whole force, to-morrow, we ought to defeat the force the enemy has. Six batteries of the Reserve Artillery have been sent up and more will be sent up to-morrow.¹⁷

This section indicates that Meade was thinking ahead to an offensive battle. Around the same time, he sent a message to Halleck informing him of the situation and informing him that, "at any rate, I see no other course than to hazard a general battle. Circumstances during the night may alter this decision, of which I will try to advise you. I have telegraphed Couch that if he can threaten Ewell's rear from Harrisburg, without endangering himself, to do so."¹⁸

Around ten that night, Meade started the short trip from Taneytown to Gettysburg. On the way, Hancock met Meade and reported to him the events up to the time of his

departure. Meade then stopped at the headquarters of II Corps, General John Gibbon now commanding, and ordered it forward at first light. He rode into the Evergreen Cemetery around 11:45 p.m.¹⁹ The evidence up to the night of July 1 indicates that Meade was neither bewildered nor hesitant and ordered attacks at every opportunity; it was his fourth day in command.

Around midnight, the start of July 2, Meade met with Generals Henry Slocum (XII Corps), Howard, Sickles (III Corps), Gouverneur Warren (Chief Engineer), and other officers and told them that the entire army was on its way. (Hancock had returned to II Corps in Taneytown to lead it into Gettysburg.) Meade was told that the position was a good one and, through the pitch black, could see the outlines of the campfires of both armies. He rode along the line in the dark to obtain a general outline of its features; he then went to the house on the Taneytown Road chosen as his headquarters.²⁰ Here he worked on preparations for the next day; he had been awakened at three in the morning almost 24 hours ago, and it is unclear how much he slept this night.

Prior to daybreak, he traveled around Cemetery and Culp's Hills to learn their topography. He then decided on the position of each corps and sent General Henry Hunt, Chief of Artillery, to ensure that the guns were positioned properly. Between six and seven o'clock, Gibbon, in temporary command of II Corps, reported to Meade its arrival. Meade instructed him to place it on Cemetery Ridge. General Hancock arrived from Taneytown and assumed command of his corps.²¹ Meade spent the rest of the morning receiving the commanders of divisions of III, V, and XII Corps and placing their divisions along the heights according to his plan. General John Newton, a division commander from VI Corps, whom Meade had selected to command I Corps, also reported to Meade during this time.

The Sixth Corps of Sedgwick was the only Federal corps not on the field, but it was heading toward the town on a forced march from Westminster, Maryland, over 25 miles away.²²

Meade spent the rest of the morning placing his divisions, strengthening his lines, resting his men, and dealing with Sickles, who had trouble placing III Corps in the place designated to him by Meade. Sickles had received orders as early as nine and approached Meade about eleven for clarification: he was told to place his corps to extend the line of II Corps. During this time, assuming General Alfred Pleasonton would fill the void with other cavalry, Meade approved the removal of Buford's cavalry division to Winchester for refitting. Pleasonton did not order replacement cavalry to the left flank, and this affected the battle later in the day.²³ (Meade's assumption here resulted in one of his few mistakes during the battle, but this is not part of this paper. During this time, Lee was making his plans for the attack on July 2. This involved an attack by the divisions of Generals John Bell Hood and Lafayette McClaws of Longstreet's first Corps and General Richard Anderson of General A.P. Hill's Third Corps with demonstrations on the Union right from Ewell's Second Corps.)

The rest of the afternoon is well known. In early afternoon Sickles, unhappy with his position next to II Corps, moved his corps forward as far as the Peach Orchard on the Emmitsburg Road. Sickles was visited by Meade and Hunt and ordered to return to the original line before the Confederates attacked. Meade's visit was too late, however; the battle started, and Hunt offered artillery support to Sickles. Hood attacked around four, starting an *en echelon* attack that continued for about three and one-half hours. Ewell also attacked Culp's Hill in demonstration, and this attack continued after dark. During the battle, Meade was active all along the front, dispatching orders to his corps commanders

to reinforce the Federal line. All Confederate attacks were repulsed and by day's end, the Federal line held; it was Meade's fifth day in command.

SUMMARY OF THE MEETING

When the fighting stopped, Meade summoned his corps commanders to his headquarters. His planning for the next day was based on the cost of two days' battle, and he knew that his losses were heavy, including two corps commanders. He needed to know the condition of each corps and what must be done the next day. They assembled after nine o'clock in the small house that served as Meade's headquarters and living quarters. For this summary, the list of attendees is not as important as the topics and how they were discussed.

The generals told each other of their experiences that day, the condition of their men, and satisfaction at repelling Lee's attacks. A tally of remaining men came to 58,000, certainly not an exact figure. Based on the distribution of the fighting, some corps were hit harder than others: for example, III Corps was hit the hardest. Supplies were the next topic. In the march northward, Meade had ordered his supply trains back, and by that night most men had rations for one day or less. Meade decided that if they supplemented their supplies with those from local farmers they could survive on reduced rations for a few days. The Federal position came next, some moves were discussed, including to the Pipe Creek line, which was closer to the base of supply at Westminster.²⁴

The discussions so far had been informal: these men had either marched or fought hard for the past two days and they had had little sleep. Then Army Chief of Staff General Daniel Butterfield, left over from Hooker's command, decided to organize the conference.

He proposed three questions of his own design to the wing and corps commanders. By doing so, he elevated the meeting to a formality not present at its start. Meade agreed to the procedure, although it is unknown whether he knew about it in advance. The three questions were:

1. "Under existing circumstances, is it advisable for the army to remain in its present position, or to retire to another nearer its base of supplies?" All recommended that the army remain. Some corrections to the lines were suggested and discussed.

2. "It being determined to remain in present position, shall the army attack or wait the attack of the enemy?" All generals agreed stay on the defensive.

3. "If we wait for an attack, how long?" Opinions varied, but almost all the generals agreed that the army should wait at least one day before looking at other options.²⁵

When the voting finished, Meade is reported to have said, "Such is the decision."²⁶

The meeting ended around midnight, and the following message was sent to Halleck:

The enemy attacked me about 4 P. M. this day, and after one of the severest contests of the war, was repulsed at all points. We have suffered considerably in killed and wounded; among the former are Brigadier General Paul [Samuel] Zook, and among the wounded, Generals Sickles, [Francis] Barlow, [Charles] Graham, and Warren slightly. We have taken a large number of prisoners. I shall remain in my present position to-morrow, but am not prepared to say, until better advised of the condition of the army, whether my operations will be of an offensive or defensive character.²⁷

Planning for the next day of battle started after the meeting, and it is again unclear how much Meade slept that night. Correctly anticipating a busy day, the next morning, July 3 at 8:45, he wrote this short letter to Margaretta:

All well and going on well with the Army. We had a great fight yesterday, the enemy attacking and we completely repulsing them; both Armies shattered. Today at it again, with what result remains to be seen. Army in fine spirits and every

one determined to do or die. George [Captain George Meade, their son] and myself well. Reynolds killed the first day. No other of your friends or acquaintances hurt.²⁸

With that positive statement of “do or die,” Meade and his generals went on to prepare for whatever Lee intended to throw at them. Meade’s official battle report states nothing about the meeting.

FALLOUT FROM THE MEETING

Fort Sumter was attacked in April 1861, and The First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas, Virginia), a Union defeat, occurred in July. The subsequent Union defeat at Ball’s Bluff in October 1861 forced Congress to form, on December 20, the Committee on the Conduct of the War. The Civil War was undeclared, and up until the formation of the committee, Congress had no part in the management of the war for which it was appropriating Federal funds: this does not sit well with Congress at any time. This joint committee comprised members of the House and Senate and was intended to provide insight into how Lincoln, the constitutional commander-in-chief of the armed forces, was prosecuting this undeclared war. Senator Benjamin Wade led the committee, and its seven members were largely Radical Republicans, who did not trust professional soldiers, i.e., West Point graduates. As the war progressed, they became increasingly antagonistic toward Lincoln’s war plans.²⁹

Politics were not alien to the Union armies. The large majority of regiments were organized by the states, and the officers of those regiments were appointed by the governors. Not all appointments were based on military merit, and political patronage was

rife: promotions were no different. As Timothy J. Orr wrote in his article “‘All Manner of Schemes and Rascalities’: The Politics of Promotion in the Union Army”:

Frantic arguments at the state level increasingly determined the course of promotions, affecting the quality and administration of the army. Scholars have not appreciated how northern state politics unavoidably intersected with Union military life. Throughout the war, northern partisanship affected the promotion of officers, hindering chances for the Union Army to operate as a full-fledged meritocracy. . . . Essentially, state politics channeled partisanship into an institution that strived to be apolitical, and even the test of battle often failed to overrule the influence of political animosities in determining the advancement of military leaders.³⁰

Later in March 1864 after taking command of all Federal armies, Grant would learn that his command included political generals of dubious military ability, but who had influence with specific groups whose support Lincoln needed. Examples include Franz Sigel (Germans and Europeans), Benjamin Butler (Democrats), and Nathaniel Banks (Massachusetts). Also, Grant would stop the practice of officers writing to governors or congressmen for help with military matters such as transfers, leaves of absence, or promotions, ordering that all such military matters were to go through proper channels.³¹ In short, politics and political intrigue permeated many aspects of army life in the 1860s.

After Gettysburg, Lincoln, Halleck, and Congress were all disappointed that Meade’s pursuit of Lee was not more aggressive and that he did not attack the ANV after Pickett’s Charge and prior to its crossing the Potomac River. Lincoln did not pursue the matter and Meade remained in command. Then, the fall of 1863 produced the inconclusive Bristoe and Mine Run campaigns in Virginia. In addition, in October Sickles returned to the army expecting a command, and learned that Meade would never give him another. To worsen matters, Meade in 1864 ordered the breakup of I Corps and III Corps (Sickles) and their units reassigned to II and V Corps.³² As a result, during the fall and winter, many

scurrilous reports and accounts started to appear questioning Meade's aggressiveness during the Battle of Gettysburg (including the pursuit of Lee's army), and the committee decided to investigate these accusations. A sample follows:

This from a "distinguished military writer who has had much observation in the Army of the Potomac," published September 1863:

In no instance has success been followed up with vigorous and rapid blows; on the contrary, the enemy have been allowed to retreat without molestation, until they had time to rally their scattered forces and fortify themselves. The battle of Gettysburg was purely defensive, and our success was mainly due to the natural strength of our position, to our artillery, and the firmness of a portion of the troops, but in no degree to the strategy or ability displayed by any of the generals, from the senior down.

(...)

Here, then, we have a commander but a few days previous magnified into a great general, for his success in a battle which he was forced, in defence [*sic*], to fight; which was due alone to the natural strength of his position, and the courage of the rank and file, and not, as I have before said, to any display of his military abilities.³³

Rather than denigrate Meade, this article published December 1863 offers an indirect tack (italics in original):

It is not a matter of history, but it is a matter of the plainest common sense, that neither Gen. Meade or any other military chieftain living could have taken the Army of the Potomac, and in so short a time have it well enough "in hand" to hurl it successfully against such a witty, well organized. and well led host, *without aid from his immediate predecessor* [Hooker].

Gen. Meade can ask for no higher honor than that which he acquired by winning such a victory over the best disciplined army the rebels have in the field, in a series of battles which commenced only about forty-eight hours after he assumed command of the Army of the Potomac, *even upon the plans of another!*³⁴

Perhaps the most famous attacks on Meade came in letters to newspapers from a writer under the pseudonym "Historicus," presumed to be Sickles. Although the writer states that this narrative is meant to be "dispassionate" and "impartial," it refers curiously

to Sickles as the “genius of the First Napoleon.” Were it not so potentially damaging, it might be considered humorous. This excerpt is from a letter to the New York Herald in March 1864: “It is strange that General Meade should make no mention in his report of this singular and most important fact: That he issued a plan of campaign on Wednesday, July 1, directing his whole army to retire and take up the defensive on Pipe Creek.”³⁵

During the investigation, Hooker allies Butterfield and III Corp’s General David Birney, for example, testified that Meade was indecisive and wanted to retreat. They offered the July 2 meeting as evidence of Mead’s indecisiveness. In contrast, Generals Gibbon, Newton, Slocum, George Sykes, Alpheus Williams, and Slocum testified to the opposite, which agreed with Meade’s testimony and the record of messages between him and Halleck.³⁶ Meade’s testimony, dated March 5, 1864, numbers 28 pages in the reference chosen for this paper, and most of it consists of his account of his command of the army in 1864 punctuated by questions. In his account of Gettysburg, he did not mention the July 2 meeting, but included it at the end of his testimony in which he addressed two specific points to counter criticism he had received in the press: did he issue an order to retreat (no) and did he wish to retreat on July 2 (no).³⁷

The committee actually grilled him more on his putative retreat order and the pursuit of the ANV than anything else, and asked little about the July 2 meeting. In the end, the committee went with politics, according to a summary by Professor William Whatley Pierson, Jr., in 1918:

Despite Hooker's incapacity to command large bodies of troops, he had the favor of Chase, of the majority of the radicals, and of the committee, the last of whom remained faithful to him throughout the war. He was opposed by Stanton and Halleck, and, when removed, was succeeded by General George G. Meade. When the committee came to investigate the battle of Gettysburg, Generals Sickles and

[Abner] Doubleday, who had been called as witnesses, and later others, testified that General Meade had contemplated a retreat and had prepared an order to that effect before victory was secured, but was prevented from retreating by the attack of Lee. Wishing Hooker restored to command and possibly thinking, certainly alleging, Meade to be incompetent, Wade and Chandler sought the President. On March 4, 1864, the chairman ordered the clerk to enter the following upon the Journal:

Having become impressed with the exceeding importance of the testimony taken by the committee in relation to the army of the Potomac, more especially in relation to the incompetency of the general in command of the army, he and Mr.[Senator Zachariah] Chandler had believed it to be their duty to call upon the President and the Secretary of War, and lay before them the substance of the testimony taken by them, and, in behalf of the army and the country, demand the removal of General Meade, and the appointment of some one more competent to command. They accordingly did so yesterday afternoon; and being asked what general they could recommend for the command of the army of the Potomac, they said that for themselves they would be content with General Hooker, believing him to be competent; but not being advocates of any particular general, they would say that if there was any general whom the President considered more competent for the command, then let him be appointed. They stated that Congress had appointed the committee to watch the conduct of the war; and unless this state of things should be soon changed it would become their duty to make the testimony public which they had taken, with such comments as the circumstances of the case seemed to require.

A number of high officers held that Meade should have attacked after the third day of Gettysburg, and this opinion was also cited as proof of incompetency. From the testimony and the facts before the committee, it is difficult to see how they could have thought otherwise than they did, though politics was involved, complicating a situation which should have remained a military one only. The testimony and the report based upon it severely condemned General Meade, but the cherished design of the committee, the restoration of Hooker as commander, was not achieved.³⁸

This excerpt offers much. First, the suggestion that the committee would be “content” with Hooker would have made Lincoln an offer he probably would refuse as he had already relieved Hooker of command of the AOP after the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. Within a week of this journal entry in 1864, Congress would approve the rank of lieutenant general and with it, Lincoln would promote Grant to lieutenant general and

General of the Armies; therefore, is possible that Lincoln wanted Grant to decide Meade's fitness for command. Second, it seems clear that the primary complaint against Meade was that he did not pursue Lee after July 3: all of Meade's other "offenses" are made to support this primary accusation. (more on this in Summary and Conclusions.) Third, that the committee would recommend for army command a general defeated soundly by Lee (Hooker) and suggest that the general who defeated Lee (Meade) was less competent is a conspicuous indicator of the abject political nature of the committee.

The toxic political climate under which these generals operated cannot be underestimated. Remember that when he was first awakened on June 28, Meade's first thought was *not* that his camp might be under attack, *but that he might be arrested*. Why would he think this? His military performance during the campaign was not in question, and his conscience was clear, as he wrote. Then later after Lee's defeat, a cabal of officers from his army accused him of vacillation, and their political influence brought him to the congressional committee. This committee of congressmen with little military experience judged generals by their political views—Meade was known to have expressed none, but this seems not to have helped him—and less on their military ability. With the Emancipation Proclamation, the war's goal had surpassed the preservation of the Union (or restoring the *status quo*, including slavery) and became a sort of revolutionary struggle; therefore, from the committee's standpoint, there was much to be suspicious of. This did not make it easy on the generals, and the political motivation behind the inquiry should be clear: a congressional committee investigated the actions of a commander of the Army of the Potomac that *won* a battle outright.

The legitimate, constitutional concern of Congress must be balanced against the politics of the time and the fact that Grant did not remove Meade from command and did not intend to do so. Meade remained in command until June 28, 1865, exactly two years after taking command. For the reasons listed in this section, the actions of the Committee on the Conduct of the War *should have* little influence today on opinions of Meade's demeanor during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Unfortunately, this seems not to apply to historians and their conclusions, and the influence of these unproven accusations started early with the July 2 meeting at their center. Characteristics of the ambivalent opinion of Meade at Gettysburg include:

1. Statements of his uncertainty or desire to retreat, *but*
2. Grudging admission that meeting with his generals was necessary and bespoke competence.

The Comte de Paris served in the Union army until 1862 and did not witness this battle, but offered an early example in *The Battle of Gettysburg from the History of the Civil War in America*, published in 1886 (italics added):

The enemy has not spoken his last word, and Meade has cause to fear that another day's fighting, equally as murderous, may cause his whole army literally to melt away. Without ordering a retreat, *his duty is therefore to anticipate and to prepare for it.* In the evening, before the combat has ended on the right, he summons a council of war at his headquarters for the purpose of ascertaining the opinions of the corps commanders, the condition of their troops, and taking measures for the morrow.³⁹

After discussing the questions offered by Butterfield, he added:

If he had found that his lieutenants inclined to the opinion that their troops had suffered too much to continue the struggle, *he would undoubtedly have given the order to retreat.* But it is of no consequence, for, whatever may be the opinion of a council of war, the *general-in-chief, being alone responsible, should, if the decision is a good one, receive all the credit of it.*⁴⁰

These quotes compose an early example of the split view of Meade's leadership in the battle. This fissure is shown by the italics in the above quotes: he *undoubtedly* would have ordered retreat, *but* because he made a good decision, he should get credit. Of course, it is the commander's responsibility to consider all options, and in this case, Meade had only two: stay and fight or retreat. (Not surprisingly, after he eliminated Longstreet's move to the right, these were Lee's options, too.) Therefore, if retreat was on the table, it was his duty to consider it.

Tucker's quote above from *High Tide at Gettysburg* (1958), is part of another example of this bifurcation: the council of war was evidence of his uncertainty. It continues (italics added):

It had become almost axiomatic to behind-the-lines observers that councils were vacillating, pusillanimous, and pretty certain to come up with the wrong decision. Meade's council...made bold, concise recommendations which Meade accepted. It reversed the old proverb that "councils never fight."

There is much to suggest that Meade wanted to withdraw to his Pipe Creek line on the night of July 2, and the evidence is sufficiently cumulative not to be brushed aside lightly. Certainly it is not conclusive, but the contention of some of his own officers that he preferred withdrawal is a valid part of the Gettysburg story. He did not retreat and he did not at any time issue an order to retreat; consequently, he is entitled to full credit for staying on the field and slugging it out with Lee on the third and decisive day of the battle. But quite naturally he was uncertain about the wisdom of this course, and surely there was reason for him to be uncertain.

(...)

Meade decided to stay, but was it altogether, or even mainly, because of the vote of his corps commanders?⁴¹

Tucker continues the bifurcation of opinion on Meade's intent, after describing meetings of a commander with his generals as (squeezing in the word) "pusillanimous." Other than the accounts and testimony of individuals known to be anti-Meade, it is unclear how much

there is to “suggest that Meade wanted to withdraw.” He states that the evidence is inconclusive, but Tucker thinks it does *appear* as if Meade wanted to withdraw, and there were reasons for this, but he deserves full credit for staying.

Edwin B. Coddington in *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (1968) mentions this uncertainty, but does not dwell on it and puts it in a different context (italics added):

Fully aware of heavy losses from straggling and two days of fierce combat, he could not determine their extent or the general condition of his men until he could consult with his generals and obtain information and advice. *He was still unsure of himself in the role of commanding officer. Furthermore, he considered it conducive to efficient operations for the general of the army not to shroud his actions in secrecy, but to keep his corps commands and other important officers informed of developments.* For these reasons he decided to call a meeting at headquarters as the easiest and most satisfactory way of getting the opinions of his immediate subordinates.⁴²

Coddington concentrates on Meade’s concern of having an open professional relationship with his subordinates, a natural reaction to the cronyism of Hooker and his political friends. And Coddington sees the relationship as a two-way street: Meade asking for opinions, but passing information to his commanders they might need. (This latter characteristic should be obvious in reading his many messages to his commanders in the three days after he took command.)

Allen C. Guelzo takes a particularly harsh view of Meade in *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (2013), stating about the meeting, “But if Meade was looking for an affirmation for a fallback to Pipe Creek after this disastrous day, he did not get it.”⁴³ This assertion assumes that Meade wanted to retreat before the meeting. After the commanders voted to stay and fight, Guelzo writes:

This was not the conclusion Meade had wanted: if Sickles' misbehavior had given him the excuse he needed for retreating, his corps commanders had just stripped it away...He had taken the poll and it had not gone his way, and he would have to live with it. No one doubted Meade's personal courage, but there was a general sense that this was not the moment to revert to McClellan-style risk-aversion. "He thought it better to retreat with what we had, than run the risk of losing it all," and there was no doubt in Henry Slocum's mind that "but for the decision of his corps commanders, Meade and the Army of the Potomac "would have been in full retreat...on the third of July."⁴⁴

He accounts for Meade's short time in command, staff not of his choosing, and fighting on an unfamiliar battlefield not of his choosing (the normal concessions to the facts), but concludes: "Meade has had his admirers over the years, but much of the admiration is dutiful rather than enthusiastic, almost forced...Meade's behavior at Gettysburg was entirely reactive, a matter of responding to critical situations as they were thrust upon him."⁴⁵ One might ask: Given that he ordered Pickett's Charge and lost the battle, could admiration of Lee be considered similarly forced?

Finally, Professor Jennifer Murray, whose current project is a biography on Meade, has written:

By gathering his subordinates, Meade now had a clearer, defined understanding of the status of his army; in putting the questions to a vote, Meade found his subordinates in agreement with himself. With a consensus obtained, the Army of the Potomac prepared for the third, and ultimately final, day of battle...The Congressional investigation failed to yield decisive results and amounted to little more than political grandstanding. Meade remained in command of the Army of the Potomac through the duration of the war. Confederate surrender and Union victory, however, did not quell disputes over Meade's leadership at Gettysburg. Union veterans writing postwar accounts continued to perpetuate the claim that Meade did not want to fight at Gettysburg. In writing his memoir, *Gettysburg and Chancellorsville*, published in 1882, Abner Doubleday portrays Meade as a commanding general reluctant to fight at Gettysburg.⁴⁶

Murray points out the inadequacy of the committee's conclusions and the overt political nature of the case against Meade and of the conclusions in general.

In summary, political considerations relevant in the 1860s appear to have undue influence even today. The case against Meade involved opinion or testimony by malcontents with grievances against Meade—Sickles, Butterfield, Birney, Doubleday—or by the Committee on the Conduct of the War and its agenda of restoring Hooker to command. It is unfortunate that those unfounded allegations still hold sway 150 years after the battle.

LEE'S MEETINGS THROUGH JULY 2

According to the record, Meade called only one meeting with all his commanders after five days in command, that of the night of July 2. However, during that time, he met with subsets of his commanders as circumstances arose. His calling that one meeting on July 2 has caused much unwarranted criticism of uncertainty and non-aggressiveness from the time of the battle onward.

But what of Lee? How much did he confer with his generals? The Confederate Congress had no equivalent to the Northern Committee on the War (and no political parties to speak of), so no formal inquiry of Lee's actions was convened. If calling a meeting makes Meade "non-aggressive" or "hesitant," then how well did Lee's meetings help him? An accounting of Meade's meetings might suggest a parallel accounting of Lee's: this section will do this.

An excellent source for an accounting of Lee's actions during the Gettysburg campaign is *Last Chance for Victory* by Scott Bowden and Bill Ward. They maintain that much misinformation on Lee's performance has been repeated so much as to become dogma and that it is all largely untrue. 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. In fact, Bowden and Ward expend much ink to track Lee's movements meticulously, which makes this book an excellent vehicle to track Lee's meetings; thus, most of this accounting is from their book.

As with the summary of Meade's July 2 meeting above, the details of Lee's meetings are not as important as their accounting. Lee sent orders via couriers throughout this period, but those orders are not germane to this section and are not included below:

June 28 – Stuart offered Lee no information on Federal movements as of this date. Lee was briefed by Harrison, a spy commissioned by Longstreet, that the AOP was in Maryland. Lee had no knowledge of this, and at one point stated, "I do not know what to do." With no other intelligence, Lee decided to act on Harrison's information and concentrate his army.⁴⁷

July 1 – Hearing artillery to the east, Lee stopped at the Cashtown Inn to confer with Hill as to the reason for the firing and for any information on the battle. Hill, sick in his cot all morning, knew nothing of the battle his men were fighting, but left his cot to learn what was going on.⁴⁸ By the afternoon, unsure of when the divisions of Rodes and Early would arrive, "Lee was unwilling to risk further action until the Army of Northern Virginia was concentrated or an opportunity presented itself."⁴⁹

July 1 – Discussing the action of Rodes's division with Lee, Heth suggested that he (Heth) should attack with his division, to which Lee responded, "No, I am not prepared to bring on a general engagement today—Longstreet is not up."⁵⁰

July 1 – In the evening as the battle died down, Lee met with Longstreet to discuss the next steps of the army. Longstreet proposed his turning movement to the south, but Lee insisted on attack the next day.⁵¹

July 1 – After his discussion with Longstreet, Lee rode around the northern curve of his line to meet with Ewell, Early, and Rodes. Although successful in helping to defeat two Federal corps, Ewell made no attempt to take Cemetery Hill or Culp's Hill, despite orders from Lee (via his staff) to do so. (The nature and wording of these orders and any possible discretion they offered Ewell have been argued at length, but are not germane to this paper.) Lee reportedly intended to bring the Second Corps around the town to the right (south) of the army, which would straighten his line and allow for a stronger attack against a supposedly weak Federal left.⁵²

Ewell, assisted with experienced argumentation from Early, a former prosecutor and skilled in argumentation, suggested that his corps would be more useful in its current position, from which it could take Cemetery or Culp's Hill. Early also suggested to Lee that it would be bad for morale to evacuate the town that his men had fought for and won. Lee eventually agreed, and modified his plan to incorporate attacks from Ewell on the Federal right.⁵³ (Because the account of this meeting is from Early's recollection, there is some question as to how much is true. This is not a topic of this paper, but it is covered in Bowden and Ward.⁵⁴) This ended Lee's meetings for the night, and like Meade, he slept little as he planned for the next day's attack.

July 2 – After sending out reconnaissance missions to the left of the Federal line, Lee met first with Longstreet and Hill on Seminary Ridge to discuss his plan for securing the Round Tops. Lee then travelled to Ewell's headquarters again and ordered him to move

at the sound of Longstreet's guns. Lee then travelled back to Seminary Ridge to meet with Generals Longstreet, Lafayette McLaws, and Hood covering his plans for the attack. (McLaws and Hood witnessed a contentious Longstreet disagree openly with Lee about the placement of their divisions, not only an unusual, improper sight, but almost unheard of in this army; however, this is not a topic of this paper.)⁵⁵ Two things are notable about this meeting:

1. Hill was not present for a meeting on a coordinated attack requiring two divisions of his corps, and neither were commanders of the division involved, Generals Anderson and Dorsey Pender.

2. Ewell was not present either. Given the length of the Confederate line over which the attacks were to be made and the need for coordination, the order to attack at the sound of the guns seems inadequate.

July 2 – Lee returned to Ewell's headquarters to survey the area over which the Second Corps would attack and to explain the overall plan of attack to Ewell. (Lee also rebuked Ewell, Early, Rodes, and others for their failure to pursue the Federals the day before.⁵⁶)

July 2 – Lee returned to Seminary Ridge and rode with Longstreet as his corps marched south to their assigned positions. It was on this trip that Lee observed the exposed position of Sickles's corps and ordered a change in the attack strategy.

This accounting of Lee's major meetings with his commanders concurs with Coddington's assessment that he met with his subordinates individually and held no meeting with all his commanders.⁵⁷ Things to note about Lee's meetings:

1. Lee did discuss his plans with his generals, and somewhere along the line received casualty reports.

2. If Early's recollection is true, on the night of July 1, Lee allowed himself to be talked out of his original plan (of moving II Corps to the right of the army) and talked into Early's plan (to attack Cemetery and Culp's Hills).

3. Lee took the time to travel to his commanders' headquarters for his meetings with them: this was important to study and discuss details for upcoming attacks. The National Park Service wayside exhibit at the newly restored site of Lee's headquarters states, "Fighting his largest battle, Lee was a busy man at Gettysburg. He spent a significant amount of time on horseback, riding around the battlefield."⁵⁸ He visited Ewell and Longstreet twice, and it is unknown whether he visited Hill on July 1 or 2. Whereas this is laudable for a commander, it might have been a luxury Lee could not afford. Although Lee had a small staff, couriers were available to summon his generals.

Although he reported no obvious symptoms during the battle, there is some evidence that Lee had suffered from angina pectoris, a symptom of cardiac disease, which with the limited medical knowledge of the time, was called pericarditis. He appears to have had an attack in March 1863 with a recovery lasting until April, and it is unclear if the condition continued during the Gettysburg campaign. It is true that he won the Battle of Chancellorsville in early May 1863, but Lee was 56 years old and not well.⁵⁹ The Confederate line was longer than the Union line by about two miles, and Lee's riding along this line to his commanders could not have been good for his overall health. His commanders were much younger and could better tolerate trips to Lee's headquarters.

4. As Lee planned them, the Confederate attacks on July 2 required a coordination far exceeding anything on the Federal side. The three corps of the ANV were to attack along a five-mile concave front in a supporting fashion (Ewell was to attack at the sound of Longstreet's guns on the far side of the line), but Lee had no meeting with all three corps commanders so that the three of them could discuss timing and objectives and so forth. It is true that he had three corps commanders versus seven for Meade, but attacks whose execution is based on coordination, command, and control should indicate attack parameters that the commanders must follow. This of course was not done. Contrast this with Meade, whose defense required less coordination, but who held a meeting of his commanders that allowed them to compare notes and make suggestions for reinforcements, artillery placement, supply, and adjustments to the line.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined General Meade's July 2 meeting with his commanders starting with Meade's first days in command, summarizing the meeting, and reviewing its fallout both contemporary and post-bellum. It then contrasted Meade's actions from June 28 to July 2 with those of Lee during the same period. Conclusions may be drawn from this discussion:

1. The record of Meade's orders, messages, and letters from June 28 to July 2 indicates no hesitation or uncertainty. He did not even call his commanders together for a meeting; rather, he sent orders moving his commands northward, indicating to Halleck that he intended to give Lee battle. Later messages indicate a commander intent on movement

and preparedness for battle. It is clear that his Pipe Creek line was a contingency plan and not a primary fighting line, and a responsible commander must consider all contingencies.

2. Regardless of whatever defamatory adjective is used to describe the July 2 meeting, be it “uncertain” or “pusillanimous,” Meade’s meeting indicates neither. Given that Meade had seven corps commanders, it made perfect sense to call them to him, rather than travel to each separately. Also, with all the commanders in one room, they could discuss necessary re-alignments to the line and reallocation of forces, especially artillery. Even with a simpler plan than Lee’s—hold the ground—there is nothing about this meeting that counters good military sense.

(In fact, although these are beyond the coverage of this paper, i.e., up to and including the July 2 meeting, it should be noted that during the remaining two weeks of the campaign, Meade held two more such councils with his generals. One was in late afternoon of July 4 to determine Lee’s intentions and possible Federal actions. The second was on the night of July 12 to tackle the question of attacking Lee’s fortifications around his Potomac River crossing. In both of these meetings, Meade not only asked for opinions, but received status on the condition of the army, a legitimate military concern. It should be clear that Meade favored this method of command regardless of any future criticism he might receive.)⁶⁰

3. The constitutional legality of the Committee on the Conduct of the War notwithstanding, it is clear that it manifested overt political bias in favor of General Hooker, who lost to General Lee, and against Meade, who defeated Lee. This, and Meade’s remaining in command a full two years, should eliminate its use in judging Meade, but history shows that it has not.

The committee's interrogation of Meade concentrated on his failure to pursue the Confederates after the battle, indicating this as a sign of his un-aggressiveness. To bolster this argument, Meade's political foes highlighted any behavior remotely linked to uncertainty or hesitancy. The Pipe Creek line and the July 2 meeting are two of these indicators. Although both of these fulfilled sound military duties, Meade's intent and their execution has been warped by the desire to pile evidence on the "Unaggressive Meade" theory, having started during the war and continuing to this day. Thus, the July 2 meeting alone has little intrinsic accusative value by itself, but coupled with other putative Meade "failures," simply adds to the list.

To verify this, consider the alternative, the status of the meeting had Meade pursued and routed the Confederates and ended the war. In this case, the July 2 meeting would be a mere footnote in the Gettysburg account. The meeting has import *only* as a supporting charge to the larger charge of Meade's hesitation, a leg holding up the table, so to speak. As such, it would have historical value only in its account and not as judgment. The Pipe Creek line is another leg in the table and similarly useless by itself.

Further, since the war, various authors have exhibited a curious split decision on Meade's performance: they admit that he won the battle, but offer a number of "behaviors" that somehow diminish his role or stature as victor. These putative errors appear to be largely driven by the accusations of a few of Meade's political enemies, and are based on the uncorroborated "evidence" of his uncertainty. These "revelations" on Meade's behavior during the battle do not advance the quality of the historiography on the battle, and in fact detract from it.

4. Similar to Meade, Lee conferred with his generals, although he convened no meeting of all three corps commanders. After his briefing from the spy Harrison on the position of the Federal army (and upon hearing nothing from Stuart), Lee decisively ordered the concentration of the army. As shown above largely from Bowden and Ward, Lee conferred with his generals throughout the battle. Coddington summarizes Lee's actions thus after the battle commenced:

Having made his decision to stay at Gettysburg and go on the offensive, Lee pondered the best way to carry it out. From the close of the first day's fighting until late that night he discussed battle plans with his generals. He held no council of war, nor did he meet all of them together at one time, even informally. Instead he himself rode out to consult with each corps commander and his chief subordinates, and he saw other officers individually or in groups at his headquarters.⁶¹

Lee's plan of attack for July 2 depended on coordination and timing between Ewell and the other two corps making the main attack. Yet Lee convened no meeting of his commanders to discuss the attack. The attacks for that day failed, partly from poor coordination and bad timing, partly because Lee provided no command oversight during the battle, partly because Meade and Hancock led an active defense, and partly because Federal soldiers matched the Confederates blow for blow.

5. The resultant proclivity to disparage Meade can produce conclusions opposite from what the data bespeaks to an author. One example of this is this passage from Guelzo:

Meade's behavior at Gettysburg was entirely reactive, a matter of responding to critical situations as they were thrust upon him. ... Granted: he was in top command for only three days, with staff he didn't know and didn't have time to replace, on a battlefield he hadn't chosen and wasn't even noddingly familiar with. But he also stayed reactive to the very end, even down to missing Pickett's Charge. ... Winning the battle had less to do with Meade than it did with a bevy of otherwise minor characters—Pap Green, Joshua Chamberlain, Samuel Carroll, Alexander Webb, Francis Heath, Patrick O'Rorke, Strong Vincent, Gouverneur Warren, Norman Hall, George Stannard—who stepped out of themselves for a moment and

turned a corner at some inexpressibly right instant. These self-starting performances became almost routine for Union officers at Gettysburg; by contrast, they are achingly absent from the Army of Northern Virginia.

It is possible to say, in that light, that Robert E. Lee lost the battle of Gettysburg much more than George Meade won it.⁶²

First, Guelzo conveniently omits the necessary evacuation of Meade and his headquarters to Power's Hill during the bombardment, to which he consented after considerable prodding from his staff.⁶³ Second, Guelzo's contention sounds as if combat is a joust between two knights on horseback, a personal contest of honor and glory. This is definitely not true for two armies totaling 150,000 men one-half mile apart: in fact, each army is a system, a combination of many parts working as one, and success goes to the side with the better working parts. His own statement confirms this by listing the self-starting "bevy of minor characters" who appeared routinely at the right time doing the right thing. Rather than detract from Meade, this is a compliment to the quality of Federal leadership and Federal system of promotions. In essence, *this is exactly what should happen in an army in battle*: it is called *initiative*. He states further: "by contrast, they ["minor" characters contributing to victory] are achingly absent from the Army of Northern Virginia," indicating that the Confederate system broke down during the battle.

Calling Meade "reactive to the end" is another way of stating that he was smart enough to stay put and let Lee attack him, exactly what Lee did at Fredericksburg. Meade fought the battle that was given him, and he prevailed, but somehow this is inferior or second-rate. But Guelzo's grand conclusion is that Lee lost the battle more than Meade won it, and little could be further from the truth. If one looks at armies instead of persons, what actually happened was that Meade and the Army of the Potomac defeated Lee and

the Army of Northern Virginia. It should be noted also that Meade met with all his generals and Lee did not.

Guelzo's passage might hold one more secret to why Meade's contribution to the victory is often disparaged and diminished whereas Lee's decisions are deemed correct and, but for the malpractice of his subordinates, would have won the battle. He refers to the contribution of Confederate subordinates as "achingly absent." Why "achingly?" Are authors secretly rooting for the Confederates to win or is it just impossible for some authors to accept that Lee lost the battle. There is a defensiveness to such statements, an attempt to downplay Lee's responsibility as army commander. Of course, one way to do this is to downplay Meade's role in the victory, but why is this important?

The human mind makes patterns and inferences from the world continually, and it strives for understanding and certainty, but sometimes it makes patterns and connections that do not exist: this is called a "cognitive bias," and there are many. One type occurs in the processing of information, a "confirmation bias." This describes a person's natural inclination to give more weight to facts that support what he already believes and to ignore contradictory evidence.⁶⁴ Thus, if one believes that Meade was not aggressive or hesitant, one will concentrate on evidence to support that belief, including the Pipe Creek line and the July 2 meeting.

Another cognitive bias occurs when persons feel that events are beyond their control. This effect is proportional to the magnitude of the event: big events must have big causes. This is called a "proportionality bias" and it partly explains why some still refuse to believe that President John Kennedy was killed by a lone gunman, claiming that his stature almost demanded that his assassination could not be the result of one malcontent

with a rifle.⁶⁵ Proportionality bias might be responsible for this continued exaltation of Lee at Gettysburg at the expense of Meade, despite evidence to the contrary. And if one is going to discredit Meade for not pursuing, one might as well add that a meeting with his generals is a sure sign of uncertainty or hesitation. (However, if one feels the urge to criticize Meade for non-pursuit, is it fair to accuse Lee of the same thing at Fredericksburg or even on the evening of July 1 at Gettysburg?)

Finally, one must ask the question (while not agreeing with the hypothesis): If Meade was overwhelmed, *so what?* Does it matter? Must it matter? He took command of the army in the middle of a strenuous campaign with the clear probability of fighting Lee soon, and recall Halleck's order to Meade, "Considering the circumstances, no one ever received a more important command." Who would not be overwhelmed by having the weight of the republic thrust upon one's shoulders? However, despite the magnitude of his sudden and unexpected appointment, Meade took command and ordered his army forward to meet Lee. Meade did not know that his generals and soldiers would fight a better fight than the Confederates, that the Union system would triumph. In fact, Meade chose none of his commanders (except Sykes who took command of V Corps when Meade vacated), whereas Lee had chosen *all* of his commanders.

It is not Meade's fault that he had a simpler tactical problem than Lee and that he had the good sense to stick to a simpler plan. And, it is not Meade's fault that the AOP functioned better than the ANV those three days in July: if it is not his doing, it definitely is not his fault.

There is a parallel to Meade's meeting. It occurred 81 years later in a manor in southern England during World War II. Another commander, General Dwight

Eisenhower, had to decide whether Allied forces would invade northern Europe in Normandy, France. The weather had been so miserable that ships sent out on June 4 for a June 5 (the original date for D-Day) assault had to be recalled. Meteorologists predicted a 36-hour period of calmer weather on June 6 and 7. The next conjunction of tides and moonlight would occur in July, so the decision had to be made. The invasion had no backup plan: this one shot, based on overwhelming force, detailed planning, deception, and surprise, had to succeed.

On June 5, Eisenhower asked the opinion of each of his commanders—ground, air, sea. All said go, and Eisenhower agreed. After the decision, and the immense Allied force was in motion, he penned a statement to be read to the press to be used if required:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attached to the attempt, it is mine alone.⁶⁶

The note was never used because D-Day was successful, but do the meeting and note indicate that Eisenhower was hesitant or overwhelmed? No. He simply trusted his commanders and wanted to be prepared for the press. Thus, the same for Meade—he met with his generals because a commander must trust his generals. Period.

In summary, George Meade met with his generals on the night of July 2 after five days in command of which two were spent in heavy fighting against Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. No action, message, order, note, or comment up to that point suggests that Meade was overwhelmed, hesitant, or desiring retreat. Such accusation, which continues to this day, could be the result of disbelief or ignoring the facts, but their continuation today indicates that the defense of Lee will continue, despite the simple fact

that he commanded the defeated army. In short, such accusations of Meade during the battle amount to nothing more than trying to convert a great victory into a “little less great” victory, and this is unwarranted. Meade commanded the victorious army: let it end there.

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Much of the historical information in this paper is of a general nature and can be found in most works on the subject; therefore, no footnotes are provided for these data. However, they do appear for quotes and for the more obscure items herein.

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²² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-71.

²⁴ Coddington, Edwin B., *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, pp. 449-51.

²⁵ Sears, Stephen, *Gettysburg*, Boston/New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003, pp. 344-5.

²⁶ Coddington, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

²⁷ Meade, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁹ Boatner, Mark Mayo, III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, New York: David McKay, 1959, p. 168.

³⁰ Orr, Timothy, J., “ ‘All Manner of Schemes and Rascalities’: The Politics of Promotion in the Union Army,” *This Distracted and Anarchical People: New Answers for Old Questions about the Civil War-Era North*, Andrew L. Slap and Michael Thomas Smith, Ed., New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, pp. 81-2, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://books.google.com/books?id=tFEWodN8MsUC&pg=PA81&dq=timothy+orr+politics+promotion+union+army&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiXkbL5n5TfAhXu1FkKHYLdCsMQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=timothy%20orr%20politics%20promotion%20union%20army&f=false>, search on “All Manner of Schemes and Rascalities’, then select Google books tab to find *This Distracted and Anarchical People*.

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³² Guelzo, Allen, C., *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*, New York: Vintage Books, 2013, p. 449.

³³ Meade, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-5; entire letter pp. 323-31.

³⁶ Coddington, *op. cit.*, pp. 451-3.

³⁷ Meade, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-82.

³⁸ William Whatley Pierson, Jr., “The Committee on the Conduct of the Civil War,” *The American Historical Review*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association, Vol. 23, No. 3, Apr 1918, pp. 571-2, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1835274.pdf>, search on ‘Civil War Committee Conduct War Gettysburg’.

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⁴² Coddington, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

⁴³ Guelzo, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁵³ Coddington, *op. cit.*, pp. 363-5.

⁵⁴ Bowden and Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-52.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-4.

⁵⁷ Coddington, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

⁵⁸ “Lee’s Headquarters at Gettysburg—The Headquarters Complex,” National Park Service Wayside Exhibit at Lee’s Headquarters,” Lincoln Highway, U.S. Route 30, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, observed and photographed November 8, 2018.

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⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁶² Guelzo, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

⁶³ Coddington, *op. cit.*, p. 496.

⁶⁴ Buckley, Thea, “Why Do Some People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?,” Scientific American Mind web site, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-some-people-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/> accessed November 20, 2018, search on ‘Psychology of Conspiracy Theory’.

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