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THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN -- LEE'S FAILURE TO DEFINE INTENT

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

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This paper examines the extent to which General Robert E. Lee adequately delineated and conveyed his intent for the campaign into Pennsylvania in the Summer of 1863. The argument is made and defended that General Lee did not have the overall intent of the campaign firmly defined in his own mind. Failure to convey commander's intent caused his subordinates to operate without unity of effort. This led to confusion throughout the campaign and ultimately disaster at the Battle of Gettysburg. The paper discusses General Lee's correspondence and conversations which provide contradictory views of his intent for the campaign. The paper then reviews the execution of the march into Pennsylvania and demonstrates various instances in which Lee's Corps Commanders were confused by the lack of well defined commander's intent. The actual battle at Gettysburg is discussed only briefly and is used only to demonstrate the end result of the confusion which is evident throughout the operation. The paper concludes by discussing the applicability of the lessons learned to a modern day joint commander.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
ABSTRACT	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
STRATEGIC AND MILITARY BACKGROUND	2
THE NATIONAL STRATEGY.....	4
LEE'S INTENT.....	5
EXECUTION OF THE CAMPAIGN.....	8
SUMMARY	13
NOTES.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

INTRODUCTION

One of the essential elements of a successful military campaign is the ability of the commander to precisely define his intent and communicate that intent to his key subordinates. This paper will examine this element in General Robert E. Lee's Gettysburg campaign and demonstrate that the failure of General Lee to adequately define his intent was instrumental in that campaign's failure.

Various sources discuss the importance of commander's intent and the criticality of an understanding of that intent by the chain of command. Only by adequately defining his intent and ensuring that all of his key subordinates understand that intent can a commander ensure the unity of effort required to wage a successful operation. The United States Marine Corps Manual, *Warfighting*, defines intent as the reason the commander wants the mission accomplished. It goes on to explain that while the situation may change and make an assigned task irrelevant, intent is permanent. "Understanding our commander's intent allows us to exercise initiative in harmony with the commanders desire. . . . It is obvious that a clear understanding of intent is absolutely essential to unity of effort. . . . Subordinates must have a clear understanding of what their commander is thinking."¹ This paper will show that there was significant confusion throughout the Gettysburg Campaign by the entire Confederate chain of command. Lee, as the commander, was responsible for ensuring that his intentions were clear. As will be seen, he failed to clearly define those intentions and to ensure that his Corps Commanders understood them.

The paper will start by briefly reviewing the strategic and military situation in the Spring of 1863 from the Confederate viewpoint. It will then review Lee's stated objectives and plans for his invasion of Pennsylvania. Those plans will be analyzed briefly to determine how well they met the strategic objectives and how adequately Lee conveyed the intent of those plans to his subordinates. The execution of the movement into

Pennsylvania will then be discussed to determine if that movement conformed to the plans Lee initially promulgated. As will be shown, there was confusion within the Confederate command structure from the very beginning of the operation and much of this confusion can be attributed to subordinate commanders not really understanding what Lee intended for the campaign. In fact this paper will illustrate that Lee may not have been totally clear in his own mind as to what he intended to do in Pennsylvania. Very little time will be spent on the battle at Gettysburg. In regards to the battle itself, the sole issue examined will be that of Lee's command and control because it follows directly from the apparent lack of a well defined intent.

As with any analysis of historical events the current writer is at the mercy of the attitude and prejudices of previous historians and biographers. This is particularly true for this subject. A great many writers on the Battle of Gettysburg have assigned blame to Lee, Longstreet, Stuart, etc.. To negate editorial prejudices as much as possible, information used in this paper came directly from the *Official Records* or was cross referenced from multiple sources.

STRATEGIC AND MILITARY BACKGROUND

The spring of 1863 found the South in the second year of its bitter struggle for independence from the United States. The Confederacy had been unsuccessful in gaining foreign recognition and, despite growing anti-war sentiment in the North, the struggle showed every indication of dragging on. Inflation was quickly turning Confederate money into useless paper. There had been food riots in Richmond, and the food situation was critical, especially in Virginia. Two years of war had shattered northern Virginia farm crops. An inadequate national railway system limited the ability to transport food throughout the country. The damage done by many battles and Union occupation notwithstanding, Virginia was having a hard time supporting both herself and Lee's Army

of Northern Virginia. Despite all of this morale among the populous and especially the leadership was relatively high.²

Militarily the most serious threat was Grant's drive down the Mississippi in a continuing effort to take Vicksburg and sever the eastern Confederacy from its western states. In central Tennessee, General Bragg had fought Union General Rosecrans to a stalemate and Union forces posed no major threats. The brightest spot in the Confederate military situation was General Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia. In six months his forces had handed the Army of the Potomac two crushing defeats at Fredericksburg (Dec. 1862) and at Chancellorsville (May 1863). The Army of the Potomac had returned to its encampments north of the Rappahannock River and Lee's army was securely entrenched south of the river in the heights above Fredricksburg.

Within the Army of Northern Virginia itself, the death of General Stonewall Jackson had forced Lee to undertake a major reorganization. Lee expanded his corps structure from two corps to three. He retained General Longstreet as Commander of I Corps. With President Davis' concurrence, Lee appointed General Ewell to command Jackson's old corps and promoted General A. P. Hill to command the newly established III Corps. In addition, he took the opportunity to restructure both his cavalry and artillery arms. As a result of this reorganization and the resultant shuffling of officers, the Army of Northern Virginia was filled with officers in new positions. These new officers included: two Corps Commanders, three of nine Division Commanders, seven new Brigadier Generals, and six Infantry Brigades temporarily commanded by Colonels. In addition one third of the cavalry officers were newly transferred to the Army from other forces.³ A restructuring of this magnitude would imply a need for the army commander to maintain tighter control over his organization until the unit was operating smoothly.

Throughout his career Lee had issued discretionary orders and he continued to do so during this campaign. Although discretionary orders give subordinates the opportunity to react to situations as they occur, it is essential that those subordinates know the ultimate

intentions of the commander. The multiple personnel changes created a critical situation in which Lee needed to clearly convey intent in order to guarantee unity of effort. As will be shown, General Lee apparently did not change his leadership style or take any other extra efforts to ensure that this happened.

The Confederate leadership, faced with the strategic situation as described above, had three general options to consider when looking for ways to relieve the Union pressure on Vicksburg. Two of these options involved detaching a sizable portion of Lee's army, possibly a corps, and sending it west. One option provided for direct reinforcement of the forces around Vicksburg. The second envisioned reinforcing Bragg in Tennessee and launching an offensive north towards Ohio, thus forcing Union forces to retreat from their drive down the Mississippi. The third option, strongly favored by Lee, was to launch a campaign into Maryland and Pennsylvania.

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY

To Lee the solution to the strategic problem would be provided by the Army of Northern Virginia successfully driving north into the heart of the Union. He was extremely confident in his army's ability. The Confederate victory at Chancellorsville particularly encouraged Lee that such a campaign had a high probability of success.⁴ He felt that operations into Pennsylvania would draw the Union forces from other theaters and would shift the scene of operations from Virginia. This would thus lift the pressure on Vicksburg and allow Virginian farmers to bring in a crop undisturbed by either army.⁵ Considering the South's comparative weakness in strategic resources, and the rising anti-war sentiment in the North, Lee felt an offensive at that time would possibly bring the North to the bargaining table.⁶ He was particularly hopeful for the success of the Northern peace movement. He hoped his invasion would panic the financial markets and throw business support behind that movement. Strong feelings on this issue propelled Lee's composition

of a 10 June 1863 letter to President Davis complaining that Southern press commentaries were hurting the peace movement.⁷ Davis, feeling that the war could be lost in the west but won in the east, approved Lee's plan.⁸

Given the realities of the situation, the overwhelming resource and manpower advantage of the North, and the fact that recognition by England was very unlikely, this plan probably had a better chance of success than either of the other two.

LEE'S INTENT

Davis' approval of Lee's plan for an offensive operation was not without some reservation. This is where the first questions concerning Lee's intent begin to surface. Davis wrote to General Lee on 31 May stating that he never fully comprehended Lee's view or purpose for the movement.⁹ This was also when the origins of the debate between Lee and Longstreet over the conduct of the campaign and the battle began to emerge. Volumes have been written concerning the relationship of these two great generals during the Battle of Gettysburg, much of that work has focused on the tactical decisions and actions during the actual engagement. But even before the army started to move from its line at Fredericksburg, a misunderstanding of intent occurred which would foreshadow future events. At the time the campaign into Pennsylvania was approved, Longstreet thought that he had an agreement from Lee about the conduct of upcoming operations. Although the army was going on an offensive operation, it would only engage the enemy from the tactical defensive.¹⁰ Lee denied that he ever made such a promise.¹¹ Both Tucker, whose book is obviously slanted in support of General Longstreet, and Freeman, Lee's biographer, concur that this misunderstanding took place. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to determine how this misunderstanding occurred, but it must be assumed that Longstreet did in fact have an erroneous impression of Lee's thinking. This was a clear failure to convey intent which resulted in disastrous consequences later.

A review of the literature and the records available also indicates that General Lee may not have clearly defined his ultimate intentions to himself. Correspondence and reports of conversations seem to point to two different sets of intentions. One view, supported by most of the General's official correspondence, points to the intention of staying in Pennsylvania as long as possible to maximize the effect of operating outside of Virginia. This view also implies his desire to avoid major combat as long as possible, only accepting battle when forced. Lee also conveyed another view in a few conversations; in retrospect his actions seem to reveal an alternative underlying intention. That intention was to engage the Army of the Potomac at the first practical opportunity and defeat it in a decisive battle.

In support of the first view, the criticality of alleviating the food crisis in Virginia was one of the primary reasons supporting the operation. Lee "wanted to give his people a respite from the ravages of war and a chance to harvest their crops free from interruption by military operations."¹² It is important to note that, if this was his true intention, he would have had to stay in Pennsylvania at least through August, if not longer, in order to allow Virginian farmers to harvest their crops. Also supporting the view that this was what he intended is his statement that he wished to avoid a "general" engagement but would try to catch the Union army off balance and destroy it in detail.¹³ As Coddington summarizes the intent:

Whatever else he might accomplish, he wanted above all to spend the summer in lower Pennsylvania maneuvering his forces so as to pose threats to the vital centers of Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, while stripping the country of greatly needed supplies.¹⁴

In support of the argument that Lee really did intend to engage and defeat the Army of the Potomac at the first possible opportunity is a conversation held with General Trimble. As the army embarked on its march north, General Trimble reported that Lee said:

We have again outmaneuvered the enemy, who even now does not know where we are or what our designs are. Our whole army will be in Pennsylvania day after tomorrow, leaving the enemy far behind and obliged to follow by forced marches. I hope with these advantages to accomplish some single result and to end the war, if Providence favors us.¹⁵

It is important to note here that when this conversation occurred Major General Isaac Trimble was without a command. He had just returned from recovering from a wound and was awaiting a new assignment. So while this conversation was implying an intent, it was not directed at a subordinate assigned to carry out the operation.

There was another conversation held between Lee and his military secretary Colonel Long which indicated that Lee envisioned a possible engagement somewhere in Adams County Pennsylvania. Defenders of Lee downplay this conversation with Coddington explaining it as nothing more than Lee expressing an opinion as to where Union troops may force an engagement¹⁶. Lee's detractors, on the other hand, claim that this conversation further demonstrates Lee's intention to force a major engagement.¹⁷

The above evidence supports the idea that Lee did not have an ultimate objective firmly set in his mind and did not really know what he intended to do once the army was in Pennsylvania. As will be discussed in the next section, his initial orders and deployments, even during the first day of the battle, seem to coincide with the intent discussed first. But other actions, especially the decision to renew the attack on 2 July, indicate that he was looking for the decisive engagement that would end the war. The telling statement concerning his intent may be the following paragraph written to Jefferson Davis on 25 June, 1863, well after the operation was underway.

I have not sufficient troops to maintain my communications, and, therefore, have to abandon them. I think I can throw General Hooker's army across (that is North) the Potomac and draw troops from the south, embarrassing their plan of campaign in a measure, if I can do nothing more and have to return. I still hope that all things will end well for us at Vicksburg. At any rate, every effort should be made to bring about that result.¹⁸

EXECUTION OF THE CAMPAIGN

As mentioned previously, confusion among the Confederate chain of command appeared even during the planning stages of the campaign. The misunderstanding between Longstreet and Lee concerning the "tactical defensive" came into play later during the actual battle, but other episodes of confusion of intent showed themselves from the very beginning of the operation. This section will focus on just a few of those incidents.

Much has been written on Cavalry Commander General Stuart's attempted ride around the Union Army which resulted in Lee losing his most valuable intelligence asset throughout the campaign. The story behind the incident is too extensive to delve into in this paper; however, Lee's discretionary orders to Stuart, though clearly stating a desire for him to guard the army's flanks, gave Stuart the leeway to interpret the situation far differently than Lee interpreted the situation.

Lee launched his campaign by shifting Ewell's Corps into the Shenandoah Valley and immediately ordering it to advance north. Hill and Longstreet were then ordered out of their positions at Fredericksburg and into the valley. Longstreet's Corps provided a rearguard in the mountain gaps as Ewell and Hill moved north. This early phase of the campaign certainly did not indicate that Lee expected to engage in any major action in the near future, because by the 24th of June his troops were strung out from Ewell in Chambersburg, Pa. to Longstreet, still in the Shenandoah. But even this early in the campaign Lee and Longstreet were not operating in unison. Lee wrote to Longstreet on 17 June.

I have heard nothing of the movements of General Hooker either from General Stuart or yourself, and therefor, can form no opinion of the best move against him. If a part of your force could have operated east of the

mountains, it would have served more to confuse him, but as you have turned off to the Valley, ... I hope it is for the best. At any rate, it is too late to change from any information I have.¹⁹

It is obvious from the tone of this letter that Lee wanted Longstreet to keep a portion of his Corps east of the Shenandoah. But going back to his orders to Longstreet on the 15th of June, he leaves the disposition and the route of the march to Longstreet's discretion.²⁰ Although a minor incident which had no effect on the outcome of the campaign, a trend was already developing where these two key players were not using the same game plan.

Longstreet was not the only Corps Commander affected by this lack of intent. Ewell's Corps was spearheading the invasion. As stated above, by the 24th of June his troops were already in Chambersburg. Initially his portion of the operation had gone exceptionally well and the orders issued to him and his division commanders seemed to indicate that Lee's intent was to remain in Pennsylvania for an extended period and avoid a major engagement.

You must, therefore, be guided in your movements by contolling circumstances around you, endeavor to keep yourself supplied with provisions, send back any surplus, and carry out the plan you proposed, so far as your judgment may seem fit.²¹

After these initial successes, Lee ordered Ewell to move toward the Susquehanna River on the 22nd of June. Again his orders were discretionary: "Your progress and direction will, of course, depend upon the development of circumstances. If Harrisburg comes within your means capture it."²² But the move to the Susquehanna created an incident among Lee, Ewell, and General Early, one of Ewell's Division Commanders, which again indicated a lack of understanding of Lee's intent for the campaign. In conjunction with his drive towards Harrisburg, Ewell ordered Early to York to cut the

railroad lines between Harrisburg and Baltimore and to destroy the railroad bridge across the Susquehanna at Wrightsville.²³

General Early, however, understood that Lee wanted to capture Harrisburg, if possible, and realized that the bridge at Wrightsville was an excellent way of crossing the Susquehanna and enveloping Harrisburg from the rear. He dispatched troops to capture the bridge but they failed to arrive before it was destroyed by Pennsylvania Militia. The significance of this otherwise minor incident is that it again indicates a major misunderstanding of intent between Lee and one of his Corps Commanders. Coddington attributes the incident to poor staff work on the part of the Confederate staff, but the blame can more properly be put on lack of commander's intent.²⁴ If Lee's intentions were clear there should have been no doubt in anyone's mind over the decision to capture or destroy a bridge crossing a major river. In his report of the battle Lee does in fact state that he intended the bridge to be captured if possible.²⁵

On the 28th of June, Lee learned that the Army of the Potomac was north of the Potomac River and on the march. He immediately issued recall orders to Ewell to consolidate his forces and to start moving south, rejoining the rest of the army which was in the vicinity of Chambersburg. These orders frustrated and confused Ewell. Ewell was more in the dark about the Army of the Potomac's movements than Lee was, but Lee's orders directed that he move in the direction of Heidlersburg. Once at Heidlersburg Ewell was free to determine either to move to Gettysburg or west towards the Cashtown Gap into the Cumberland Valley.²⁶ Ewell, who felt Harrisburg was his for the taking, was now forced to withdraw. Lee's orders left the option open to continue south or turn west from Heidlersburg. Ewell with little information on enemy troop movement was confused as to what Lee wanted and uncertain about the best course of action to take from Heidlersburg.²⁷ He was still operating under the general guidance to avoid a major engagement, but Lee's orders to move south on the east side of South Mountain almost ensured contact with Union forces. Again, Lee failed to convey his intent.

On July 1st, Heth's Division of Hill's Corps advanced towards Gettysburg to clear what they thought was a small force of Union troops, probably militia. This engagement quickly grew to include all of Hill's Corps. Hill was well aware of Lee's "no general engagement" order, but as he rushed reinforcements to support Heth in what was becoming a Corps size battle, there is no indication that he cleared Heth's advance with Lee.²⁸ By late afternoon Lee, still hesitating about a "general engagement" but seeing the opportunity of catching the then unknown number of Union units between Hill and Ewell, started to push the attack by both of these Corps.

By the evening after the first day at Gettysburg, Lee was determined to engage. At this point he seemed to have completely dropped the idea of avoiding conflict and maintaining a campaign of maneuver in southern Pennsylvania. There is an interesting contradiction between a statement he made during the move to Gettysburg and Lee's after action report which seems to bring into focus the two different views of intention discussed earlier in this paper. On the morning of the 1 July he indicated to General Anderson:

I am in ignorance as to what we have in front of us here. It may be the whole Federal army, or it may be only a detachment. If it is the whole Federal force we must fight a battle here: if we do not gain a victory, those defiles and gorges through which we passed this morning (the Gap at Cashtown) will shelter us from disaster.²⁹

In his after action report he indicated that once his trains and troops were over the Gap at Cashtown, that same gap prevented a withdrawal and forced continuation of the engagement.³⁰

The actual conduct of the battle has been the subject of volumes of scholarly work. A great deal has been written describing errors and ascribing blame. Supporters of Longstreet and the other commanders in the field blame Lee's plan as flawed. Supporters of Lee go so far as to accuse various officers of insubordination. All of that is well beyond the scope of this paper and more properly falls under the subject of tactics. However,

Lee's command style and a clear lack of understanding of intent by various subordinates pervaded the tactical situation and resulted in uncoordinated efforts by all three of the Confederate Corps throughout day 2 and 3 of the battle. Longstreet who was still operating under his "tactical defense" assumption, was making plans on the night of July 1st to shift the army to the south and establish a defensive position. The feeling that Lee would eventually come around to his "tactical defense" idea may account for some of his apparent lack of initiative.

Longstreet got off to a slow start on July 3 because he and Lee had not previously reached a clear understanding of the nature, extent, and direction of his offensive plans.³¹

In addition, it is almost inconceivable that on neither the night of the 1st nor the 2nd did Lee meet with all of his Corps Commanders in a single meeting. In fact he never personally met with Longstreet the night of the 2nd to discuss face to face the planned operations for the fateful 3rd day.

In view of faulty execution of his plans on the 2nd day of the battle, Lee would have done well to have called in his 3 lieutenants to confer with them and spell out exactly what he wanted.³²

The misunderstanding of intent which had shown itself in numerous minor episodes since the start of the campaign finally culminated in the total lack of unity of effort during the battle itself. This led to a disaster for the Army of Northern Virginia.

SUMMARY

The above discussion clearly shows that lack of well defined intent played a significant if not the key role in the outcome of the campaign. The issue is not only that Lee's intent was not communicated to his subordinates but whether it really was defined in his own mind. The evidence seems to indicate that it was not.

As demonstrated with the few examples, Lee's actions did not support the intent of staying for a substantial period of time in Pennsylvania. If he truly intended to do that, one logical operational plan would have been to remain in the Cumberland Valley, defend the gaps and form a defensive line at the northern end of that valley, forcing the Army of the Potomac to attack. A brief review of Pennsylvania geography will show that the Cumberland Valley is the northward extension of the Shenandoah Valley. It is flanked on west by the eastern most ridges of the Alleghenies and bordered on the east by South Mountain. The South Mountain gradually becomes a ever decreasing series of ridge lines. The Cumberland Valley merges into the Susquehanna River basin southwest of Harrisburg. Up until that time in the war, the Confederate Army had been totally successful in operating at will in the Shenandoah and had at numerous times proved itself capable of defeating the Army of the Potomac from a defensive position. The Cumberland Valley is a large expanse of farmland which should have been capable of supporting Lee's entire army for an extended period. Operations based on this proposal would have more appropriately supported his goals.

On the other hand, if his intent really had been to attack the Federal forces at the earliest opportunity, his plan and the majority of his statements did not support this either. As shown, by the end of June he had forces scattered across all of southeastern Pennsylvania. If his intent had been for a general engagement he would have kept his army intact. One can assume that Stuart would not have allowed himself to be cut off from the

main body if, before the campaign started, Lee had indicated that he intended to initiate the decisive battle of the war within a week or two.

The final conclusion must be that Lee did not have a well defined intent. He went into Pennsylvania hoping to exploit any fortuitous situation. His movements therefore had no general continuity and lacked unity of effort. His Corps Commanders, all doing what they thought best, ended up providing little to no support of each other because there was no overriding intent.

There are many lessons in this for the modern day commander. In modern joint warfare where the campaign may stretch over thousands of miles and in which the subordinate commanders are expected to act upon their own initiative, intent is critical. In today's battlefield, commanders may receive all of their instructions via message. It is harder to convey the nuances of intent in a formatted computer generated message than in conversation. Lee was unable to define his intent and convey it in face to face conversations. During the campaign he travelled with Longstreet most of the time. The misunderstanding between those two experienced commanders who had fought most of the war together, illustrates that intent truly can be difficult to communicate.

Lee was a firm believer in allowing tactical commanders the flexibility to determine a course of action based on the situation on the ground. He was probably ahead of his time in this regard. This is doctrine in today's military. As was illustrated this freedom of action resulted in disastrous consequences because the subordinates were operating with little unity of effort. The lack of unity resulted from a chain of command where intent was not conveyed.

Finally, the effects of the "Fog of War" can be devastating to the commander if he does not have his intent well thought out in his own mind. Lee is acknowledged as one of the greatest military commanders in history. During this campaign he failed. He complained throughout the campaign of his lack of intelligence and how frustrated he was by not knowing the enemy's movement. But this shortcoming was made much worse by

his own haphazard and tentative troop movements. Once the battle was joined on 1 July, he seemed to totally lose sight of most of the objectives of the campaign and his whole focus was on defeating the force arrayed directly against him. There is danger of this in every military action. Battles seem to have a life of their own and the commander can easily be mesmerized by the engagement currently underway and ignore the overall intent of the campaign, unless it is firmly etched in his mind. The operational commander has the option of accepting battle or not. If in the "Fog of War" a great commander like Lee lost sight of the intent of the campaign, it can safely be assumed that any commander is susceptible to the same danger.

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