Supporting Robert E. Lee’s Decisions at Gettysburg

By Michael Zuhoski

The American Civil war began in 1861, and lasted four grueling years. In the end, it took the lives of over 650,000 men, and left countless others horribly mangled. It was a war that almost tore the nation apart, and might very well have had it not been for a Union victory at the battle of Gettysburg. Prior to Gettysburg, the South had strung up a number of key victories, and the very existence of the Union was in serious question. Neither side had thought in their wildest dreams that the war would last this long, and morale was at an all time low. With little will to go on, both sides came to Gettysburg willing to throw it all on the line to make this the final battle. What transpired at Gettysburg during the first three days of July, 1863, was the greatest, bloodiest, and most infamous battle ever to be fought on American soil. It resulted in the death of twenty-three thousand Confederate soldiers, nearly one-third the Army. At its conclusion, General Lee led the remnants of the army in retreat back to Virginia, thus ending the battle and sealing the Union victory. Looking back now, it is easy to criticize the decisions made by Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. However, given the circumstances that he faced, and the information he had, his decisions were not only correct, but often brilliant. He lost the battle not because of his poor decisions, but rather because of his subordinate’s inability to follow his orders.

The decisions made by General Lee at Gettysburg are the source of great controversy among historians. Most historians agree that Lee made a few blunders during the campaign, and some extremists go as far as to say that the entire loss is to be blamed on him. This is a strong statement to make against someone who is arguably the most brilliant and knowledgeable General of all time. However, as James McPerson states in his book entitled Gettysburg, Lee had very little information of the enemy’s size and strength due to the fact that his cavalry had not reported to him in weeks (37). However, based on the information that he had, he made decisions that could have, and nearly did win the battle.

The first major decision made by General Lee occurred one day before Gettysburg, and more than likely saved the Confederate Army from being destroyed. A paid spy or scout known as Harrison returned to the Confederate headquarters alleging that he had the position of the entire Union Army. The spy had a previous career as an actor, and there were serious questions surrounding the validity of his claims. Harrison informed Lee that the Union Army was within a few miles of the very spot that they were standing. Lee found this very hard to believe considering that he
had no word from J.E.B. Stuart and the cavalry, whom he had sent out with the sole intention of tracking the Union Army. Stuart was considered a fine cavalryman and extremely reliable. Lee had great faith in him and believed that if the Union Army was indeed on the move and as close as the spy claimed, he would have received word. However, Lee considered the information at hand, and chose to believe the spy and relocate the army at a road junction near a little known town called Gettysburg. As Michael Shaara states in his novel, if Lee had not chosen to relocate, the entire army would likely have been destroyed (27-30).

The following day, one of Lee's division commanders disregarded Lee's order, and in doing so hurt Lee's plan of attack badly, and cost the army thousands of men. The Confederate Army arrived at Gettysburg in pieces, due to that fact that they were spread out throughout a large part of the Northeast. As stated by Guy Emery, General Lee ordered his commanders to avoid all contact with the enemy until the army was up and concentrated (37). However, the first of Lee's Generals to arrive at the town, General Heth, went against Lee's order and began a small skirmish with a brigade of John Buford's cavalry whom he had mistaken for militia. (Buford was the first to arrive at Gettysburg, and commanded a small band of Union cavalry totaling about three thousand men). Buford soon received infantry support from the Union 1st Corps., under John Reynolds (See maps 2 and 3). According to Michael Shaara, the skirmish escalated into a large-scale battle in which Heth's division was pushed back and suffered heavy casualties (39-40). At this point the fighting had already begun, and Lee had no choice but to send support to Heth or risk losing his entire division. Bruce Catton argues that if Heth had not chosen to disobey Lee, the Confederate Army would have been able to unite and put all of their forces on the field at once, which was what Lee had originally intended (56). Instead, Heth chose to disregard Lee's order and Lee's original plan of attack was ruined.

Many historians have argued in favor of Heth's decision in later years. They argue that Heth was under the impression that the cavalry was actually militia, and since Heth had an entire division under him, it would have only been logical to push through the militia to reach his destination. While it is true that Heth mistook Buford's cavalry for militia, the fact remains that Lee's order was clear and precise. Avoid all contact with the enemy until the entire army has arrived {Emery 37). Heth's decision to attack in spite of Lee's order cost the Confederate Army thousands of troops, which they could ill afford considering that they had far fewer men than the Union Army.
Later that day, a poor decision by another of Lee's division commanders, General Ewell, cost Lee's army occupation of valuable high ground. After the fighting was back under control from General Heth's blunder, Lee quickly realized that he had a tremendous opportunity. In the days of the Civil War, good ground was the difference between victory and disaster. Lee noticed a large hill called Little Round Top that was virtually unoccupied by Union troops. Lee knew the importance of controlling the hill, and quickly ordered General Ewell, a trusted Division commander, to take the hill. This was a brilliant decision by Lee; as Guy Emery says, occupation of the hill would almost assure a Confederate victory, it was the best ground at Gettysburg (119). Ewell was told to take the hill if practical, which would have been an easy task considering he had over twenty-thousand men in his command, attempting to take a hill occupied by fewer than one-thousand Union soldiers. However, Ewell believed that he needed more support in order to take Little Round Top. He waited for support from General Longstreet, second in command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Longstreet did not arrive until nightfall, and at that point it was too dark for an attack. The Union soldiers had received support and were entrenched on the high ground.

This proved to be a very costly decision by General Ewell. Both sides were well aware that Gettysburg could not be won without possession of Little Round Top. Therefore, Lee had to attempt to take the hill the following day. However, it proved to be very costly. Lee lost thousands of men, as well as one of his most able commanders, General Hood. If Ewell had obeyed his order, and not been so cautious, the Confederacy would have undoubtedly occupied the hill by nightfall. According to Bruce Catton, had the South taken possession of Little Round Top the outcome of the battle would have changed dramatically (112).

Historians have argued that is was not in Ewell's best interest to attack the hill, and that he was unsure of the size of the enemy. However, the idiocy of this statement can be seen in a conversation General Lee had with one of his subordinates after the first day of battle. General Trimble, one of the commanders under Ewell, explained to Lee how easily it would have been to take the hill. He said, 'The man (General Ewell) is a disgrace...we could have taken that hill...god in his wisdom knows we should have taken it. We could have done it sir; a blind man should have seen it. Now they're working up there, I can hear the axes...so in the morning many a good boy will die taking that hill" (qtd. in Shaara 148-149). This account leaves no doubt that Ewell had more than enough men under him to take the hill, and his failure to do so gave the Union time to organize and prepare for an attack. Therefore, it is clear
that the problem did not lie in Lee's plan, but in Ewell's extreme caution and poor judgment.

Clearly, Ewell's failure to take Little Round Top was devastating to the Confederate campaign at Gettysburg. However, despite the lack of success so far, Lee had a plan for the third day of battle which, if carried out correctly, could turn the tide in favor of the Confederacy. Lee planned a massive offensive on the third day, in an attempt to put an end to the fighting once and for all (McPerson 120). In a conversation with General Longstreet, Lee revealed his plan. He said, 'We are adrift in a sea of blood and I want it to end. I want this to be the final battle" (qtd in Shaara 202).

Lee's plan for attack on the third day was perhaps his most brilliant decision of the battle. The Union Army was atop a slight hill known as Cemetery Ridge, and was spread out somewhat in the shape of a fishhook (See map 3). Lee had already attacked the Union left and right, and the Union had placed heavy reinforcements there. As Guy Emery writes, Lee's experience told him that the Union had placed too many men on the flanks, and had left the center extremely vulnerable. Lee correctly estimated that the strength at the Union center must have been no more than five thousand men (137). His plan was to bombard the Union center with heavy artillery strikes, further weakening it, leaving just enough artillery to support the troops when they began the charge. He would then split the Union center and take them from the rear (Tagg 179). This was a brilliant plan, which would likely have caught the Union off guard and sent them running.

Lee trusted the attack to his right hand man, General James Longstreet. However, Longstreet's inability to order the attack at the right time doomed the charge before it ever began. He was ordered to get underway as soon as possible. However, for several hours, Longstreet could not bring himself to order the attack because he believed it would fail. By the time he finally did send in his men, totaling more than fifteen-thousand, the initial shock of the artillery bombardment had worn off and the Union had brought in reinforcements. Had Longstreet given the order to attack earlier, the Union would have been caught off guard, which is exactly what Lee had planned. As Michael Shaara explains, Longstreet's delay caused the attack to lose the element of surprise, which was vital to its success (318-319). Because of Longstreet's delay, the attack had virtually no chance of succeeding. As they began the charge, they were under fire from Union cannon, with still over a mile left to walk. As they drew closer, Union grapeshot (Several small lead balls fired from cannon,
extremely effective from close range) ripped huge holes in the Confederate lines. Finally, when they were in range, volleys of Union musket fire demolished what was left of the charge. Lee's men charged valiantly, and were butchered valiantly, suffering casualties approaching an unheard of seventy-five percent. Of the thirteen Colonels under the command of General Pickett (the man credited with leading the charge), seven were dead, and six were severely wounded (Tagg 208). It would be the last offensive move made by General Lee and the Confederacy for the remainder of the war.

Historians have since argued that the attack was destined to fail from the beginning, and that Lee thought his army was invincible. After the battle even Lee himself took full responsibility for the loss (Emery 246). It is true that Lee had tremendous faith in his army and his commanders. However, it was this faith and confidence that lead to his tremendous success during the first few years of the war, and few could argue against his track record entering into Gettysburg. While it may seem that the attack had no chance of succeeding, Lee had more knowledge of the capabilities of his army than anyone, and prior to Gettysburg he had proven time and time again how his army could overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. If Longstreet had trusted Lee's judgment, and ordered the attack at the appropriate time, the outcome would likely have been vastly different. It is likely that the shock of the artillery strike, immediately followed by a massive attack by the infantry, would have taken the Union by surprise, and broken the center as Lee had intended. Instead, Longstreet convinced that the attack would fail, delayed orders to proceed until it was too late. Indeed, historians are correct in saying that the attack was doomed before it began; however, they are wrong in placing the blame on Lee.

Unquestionably, General Lee's decisions at the battle of Gettysburg were correct, and indeed ingenious at times. Those who believe that Lee made the wrong decisions during the battle must focus their attention to Lee's subordinates, and place the blame there. If Lee's orders were carried out properly, the outcome of the battle would likely have been drastically different. Those who have a good deal of knowledge about the battle can see that the actions and decisions made by Lee's subordinates were not only wrong, but often catastrophic, and lead to the Confederate loss at Gettysburg. In light off the overwhelming evidence, it should be clear to all that Lee is not to be blamed for what happened at Gettysburg.
Works Cited


