

LINCOLN'S ROLE IN THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

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MOST of you need not be reminded that the battle of Gettysburg was fought on the first three days of July, 1863, just when Grant's siege of Vicksburg was coming to a successful conclusion. On July 4, even as Lee's and Meade's men lay panting from their exertions on the slopes of Seminary and Cemetery Ridges, the defenders of the mighty fortress on the Mississippi were laying down their arms. Independence Day, 1863, was, for the Union, truly a Glorious Fourth. But the occurrence of these two great victories at almost the same time raised a question then which has persisted up to the present: If the triumph at Vicksburg was decisive, why was not the one at Gettysburg equally so? Lincoln maintained that it should have been, and this paper is concerned with the soundness of his supposition.

The Gettysburg Campaign was the direct outcome of the battle of Chancellorsville, which took place the first week in May. There General Robert E. Lee won a victory which, according to the bookmaker's odds, should have belonged to Major General "Fighting Joe" Hooker, if only because Hooker's army outnumbered the Confederates two to one and was better equipped. The story of the Chancellorsville Campaign is too long and complicated to be told here. It is enough to say that Hooker's initial moves surprised his opponent, General Lee, but when Lee refused to react to his strategy in the way he anticipated, Hooker lost his nerve and from then on did everything wrong. He took a defensive position and allowed Lee to beat the two wings of his army one at a time and push them back toward the Rappahannock River. Regarding the campaign as lost, he gave up the fight and retreated to his old camp across the river from Fredericksburg. For Hooker

*This paper was written for the annual meeting of the Lincoln Club of Delaware, held in Wilmington, February 13, 1967; it was read there in Dr. Coddington's absence by Professor Jacob E. Cooke. It is based upon a book by Edwin B. Coddington entitled *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, which is to be published soon by Charles Scribner's Sons. Dr. Coddington is president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and professor of history at Lafayette College.

the campaign turned out to be an exercise in futility at the cost of over 17,000 men dead, wounded, or captured.¹ For Lee it became the prelude to the Gettysburg Campaign; victory cleared the way for another invasion of the North, something he had wanted to undertake for a long time.

When news of Hooker's defeat reached Washington, President Lincoln wrung his hands in despair and cried out: "My God, My God, what will the country say? What will the country say?"² What indeed! Completely upset by Hooker's failure, he decided to visit the army for a firsthand review of affairs, taking with him General in Chief Henry W. Halleck, who on similar occasions in the past had proved most useful. Though Lincoln was disappointed with him because of his persistent reluctance to give outright orders, the President had nonetheless grown to appreciate Halleck's virtues as an adviser and planner. As Lincoln said: "However you may doubt or disagree with Halleck he is very apt to be right in the end."³

Lincoln and Halleck arrived in camp late on May 6, just after the army had straggled back from Chancellorsville. They found the place buzzing with recriminations over the conduct and results of the campaign. Although everyone seemed to blame everyone else, most of the corps commanders and other top officers felt that Hooker must bear the responsibility for what they considered an inexcusable defeat. Major General Darius N. Couch, who led the crack II Corps, went so far as to announce to the President his refusal to serve in the Army of the Potomac if Hooker should remain its commander. Hooker's explanations to Lincoln for his failure were a strange mixture of fact and fantasy, but those who had fought in the battle well knew that whatever he might say, his performance had been poor, if not disgraceful. They felt that without doubt he would be fired; it was only a question of *when*.⁴

¹ *War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D. C., 1889), Ser. I, Vol. XXV, pt. 1, p. 192. Cited hereafter as *OR*. Unless otherwise indicated the citation is from Ser. I.

² Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time*, Herbert Mitgang, ed. (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 61.

³ John Hay Diary, Entry for July 16, 1863, Typescript, Brown University Library.

⁴ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), VI, 199-200; *OR*, XXV, pt. 2, p. 438; George Meade [son], *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, George Gordon Meade [grandson], ed. (New York: Scribner, 1913), I, 373.

But Lincoln had come to help Hooker, not to get rid of him. It was Lincoln's practice always to give a person a second chance. As he said: "He was not disposed to throw away a gun, because it missed fire once; he would pick the lock and try it again."⁵ Lincoln had appointed Hooker to command of the Army of the Potomac over the serious objections of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and General Halleck, because he thought certain obvious weaknesses in Hooker's character were offset by qualities essential to successful leadership. Personally he liked the general, who, he believed, had considerable wit, a lively mind, and the ability to talk with great charm. To the surprise of many people Hooker had turned out to be an excellent administrator. Certainly he had done a fine job rebuilding the army physically and psychologically after his predecessor, Major General Ambrose Burnside, had practically wrecked it. Lincoln must have been amazed by Hooker's behavior at Chancellorsville; instead of performing as the bold, reckless fighter the President thought him to be, Hooker had displayed the caution of a McClellan. Now on May 6 and 7 as he consulted with the general, Lincoln told him he considered his first task to be that of finding a way of salvaging the offensive and resuming it at the earliest possible moment. All was not lost, he felt, for Major General George Stoneman had made a cavalry raid on Lee's communications, and first reports indicated great success in creating consternation and confusion behind enemy lines. Lincoln suggested that Hooker take advantage of the situation and move against Lee at once. He offered to help in devising a plan, if the general did not already have one. Hooker was evasive. Yes, he had a plan, but he furnished only a hint as to its nature. He would have to determine the morale of his soldiers, he said, before he could make any move. Then he referred to the Chancellorsville defeat as a "reverse"—a statement that must have startled Lincoln and made him worry more about Hooker's mental outlook than that of his troops.⁶

Hooker continued to bide his time, until by the end of the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁶ Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 258; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The War Years* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939), II, 104; *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds. (New York: Century, 1888), III, 154; Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, VI, 201.

second week in May any illusion Lincoln had about an immediate renewal of the offensive had evaporated. Then the President, rather than Halleck who should have written the letter, informed Hooker that in his opinion it was too late to start large-scale operations because by this time the Southerners had recovered from the effects of Stoneman's raid, regrouped their forces, and received fresh troops. He advised the general to remain on the defensive, now and then to take a poke at the Confederates so as to keep them off balance and out of mischief. Hooker's real job, he said, was to bring his own army up to snuff and to investigate the growing disaffection of his officers toward him, which if allowed to spread would prove fatal.

Although Lincoln did not say so, the greatest threat to the Army of the Potomac was not dissatisfaction among the officers—this would end quickly enough if Hooker were replaced—but its great loss of manpower. Completely unforeseen by government planners, many men who had volunteered for two years' service and others who had signed up for nine months suddenly found their terms of enlistment lapsing in the spring of 1863. During these weeks some 23,000 soldiers left Hooker's ranks. These losses, added to the heavy casualties of Chancellorsville, by the end of May had reduced the Army of the Potomac to the nadir of its strength. Not only was it in no condition to resume the offensive, but it also had difficulty countering the opening move of Lee's Gettysburg Campaign during the first week in June.⁷

In the discussions between Lincoln and Hooker before and during the Confederate invasion the office of general in chief to all intents and purposes ceased to exist. Instead of communicating with General Halleck, his immediate superior, Hooker made it a practice to get in direct touch with the President concerning matters of grand strategy. Hooker was delighted with this state of affairs and did all he could to maintain it, since he and Halleck had no love for each other, and close relations with the President obviously satisfied his ego. Lincoln went along with the arrangement because with his incisive mind and emphasis on substance rather than form, he possessed little of the bureaucrat's respect for going through channels. He had the constitutional authority to cut through red tape, and it was just as well that he did and

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218; Meade, *Life and Letters*, I, 378.

that he used it, for Halleck often lacked sufficient initiative and aggressiveness to get things done.⁸

It should be noted that when it suited Lincoln's purpose in his dealings with Hooker, he used Halleck to support his own views on strategy. For example, at the very start of the Gettysburg Campaign Hooker became convinced that the vanguard of Lee's column had moved northwest and was heading for the Potomac. As a counterthrust he proposed to cross the Rappahannock and attack Lee's rear, which was still at Fredericksburg. What did Lincoln think of this idea? Lincoln thought it a poor one, and to illustrate the dangers of the army's "being entangled upon the river," he used the famous metaphor of "an ox jumped half over a fence and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear, without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other." Then he had Halleck explain to Hooker one of the elemental principles of sound strategy: that it was much better to attack a moving column than entrenchments. Hooker seems to have had difficulty in learning his lesson, because five days later he renewed his proposal to let Lee's column march northward unopposed, while he would strike out across the river and head for Richmond fifty miles to the south. Lincoln promptly vetoed this plan and again reminded Hooker that Lee's army was his true objective. At the President's behest Halleck sent a telegram echoing his views.⁹

As the pace of the Gettysburg Campaign quickened and units of the Army of the Potomac at last set out in pursuit of Lee, Lincoln under prodding from Stanton began to perceive the disadvantages of his close, personal relationship with Hooker. It was time-consuming to carry on a heavy correspondence with a general who seemed to have lost his power of constructive thought. Hooker had become apathetic, if not demoralized, and resigned to a defensive policy unless Lincoln ordered otherwise. What brought the question of their relationship to a head was a letter from Hooker on June 16, in which he virtually challenged the President to fire Halleck.¹⁰ The general in chief had no confidence in him, Hooker said, and so long as this situation continued Lin-

⁸ *OR*, XXV, pt. 1, p. 156; pt. 2, pp. 505-506; XXVII, pt. 1, p. 47; Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, p. 271.

⁹ *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰ Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, 271; Marsena R. Patrick Journal, Entries for June 17, 19, 1863, Library of Congress.

coln could "look in vain for success," especially as future operations would require close cooperation between the two generals. It did not take Lincoln long to make up his mind, and within a few hours he wired Hooker that to remove "all misunderstanding" he was placing him "in the strict military relation to General Halleck of a commander of one of the armies to the general in chief of all the armies." Then Lincoln added: "I shall direct him to give you orders and you to obey them."¹¹ This message must have been a bitter blow to Hooker's pride, but he did not give up his attempts to evade Halleck's authority and work directly under Lincoln.

Hooker soon picked a quarrel with Halleck about the garrison troops defending Washington. The retrograde movement of the Army of the Potomac had brought it close to the jurisdictional lines of two military departments. Halleck had given Hooker the power to issue orders to troops stationed in these departments, but he reserved the right to veto any directives Hooker might give to the commander of the Department of Washington. Though Hooker was allowed to strip the defenses of the city of almost all its best infantry and cavalrymen, he became incensed when Halleck refused to let him take the last fifteen hundred or so of such troops. Thoroughly angry, he sent his chief of staff and good friend, Major General Daniel Butterfield, to go over Halleck's head and present his case for more reinforcements and greater military authority to the President. Lincoln did not let him get away with this trick, so typical of Hooker, and refused to overrule the general in chief. Hooker added this incident to the huge stock of grievances he was building up against Halleck. Later, after he had left the command of the Army of the Potomac, he loudly proclaimed that he had received practically nothing in the way of reinforcements from the Department of Washington, for which Halleck of course was to blame. He had asked for only 15,000 men, he said, and the few he got had added "no material strength" to his command. The truth was that he had obtained all of the 15,000 soldiers he had asked for; and of these, 13,000 fought at

¹¹ *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 45, 47. Lincoln tried to soften the tone of the official dispatch. He had Captain Ulric Dahlgren of Hooker's staff carry a personal message to the general in the hope of achieving better understanding between Hooker and Halleck. See Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, VI, 281-282.

Gettysburg, many in key positions, where they contributed conspicuously to the victory.¹²

Hooker's next quarrel with Halleck led to Hooker's resignation from command of the Army of the Potomac. This dramatic episode ostensibly resulted from Hooker's desperate desire to obtain even more troops for his army, this time from the garrison on Maryland Heights, overlooking Harpers Ferry. Though he had the authority to give orders to these men, he had no power to remove them from the post. The idea of getting greater control over them occurred to Hooker on June 26—if he had not had it before—as he was in the process of moving his army across the Potomac and transferring his headquarters to Frederick, Maryland. He decided that on the way he would pay the Heights an impromptu visit. But even before getting there he suggested in a wire to Halleck that he be allowed to abandon this post and to add its force of about 10,000 men to his own army, which he claimed was inferior in size to that of the enemy.

Halleck apparently did not take Hooker's message very seriously, because while his office received it at 7:30 on the night of June 26, he did not see fit to answer it until 10:30 the next morning. He reminded Hooker that the government had always regarded Maryland Heights as an important post and had spent much money and labor fortifying it. He could not approve of its evacuation "except in case of absolute necessity." Hooker soon snapped back his reply; he heatedly denied the importance of the Heights and insisted that the forces occupying them could be put to better use. He ended by begging Halleck to refer the matter to Lincoln and Stanton. Halleck had barely had time to read the message and start weighing its contents before another dispatch arrived from Hooker. It contained his famous request to be relieved of command because, with the means at his disposal, he could not cover both Harpers Ferry and Washington while facing an enemy stronger than himself. Confronted with this unexpected

¹² *OR*, XXV, pt. 2, pp. 586-587; XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 51-52, 54-57, 59, 156, 162, 167-168, 348-351, 371, 453, 593, 653-658, 914-993; pt. 3, pp. 355-358; Selected Pages from Historical and Statistical Records of the Principal Military Commands in the Union and Confederate Armies, IV, 42, Entry 161, Record Group 94, National Archives; Extract from General Stannard's Diary, Typescript, John B. Bachelder Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society; U. S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, at the Second Session Thirty-Eighth Congress, *Report* (Washington, D. C., 1865), I, 166, 170, 173.

move, Halleck did the obvious thing: He referred the resignation to the President.

At first glance this exchange of messages conveys the impression that Hooker was the injured party, the victim of unimaginative if not stupid leaders who had imposed such impossible conditions on him that he had no recourse but to resign. Certainly that was the idea Hooker deliberately tried to create. But Lincoln and Halleck were not fooled by this pose, nor should posterity be. If these communications are read in the context of Hooker's conduct throughout the campaign, then his resignation becomes an unpardonable act. He was less than frank with Halleck when he gave the size of his army as the sole reason for wanting to abandon Maryland Heights. Months later he revealed that he had wanted to use the garrison troops in cooperation with the XII Corps to cut Lee's lines of communication at Williamsport, with the hope of getting the enemy to withdraw from Pennsylvania. In turning down Hooker's request, Halleck had virtually asked him to give better reasons than he had for wanting to relinquish the post on Maryland Heights, but Hooker had begun to argue rather than to take Halleck into his confidence and explain his plans for a counterthrust against the Confederate invaders. The War Department at this time had good reason to believe that all of Lee's men were swarming over parts of southern Pennsylvania, while Hooker's troops were still struggling through southern Maryland with none of the units farther north than Frederick or Middletown.¹³ Yet at this, the most critical moment in the campaign, Hooker chose to quit!

Lincoln fully realized the dangers of changing commanders, but to retain the demoralized and irresponsible Joe Hooker as general of the only major army in the East was an even greater risk. The President met the challenge swiftly and decisively. A highly discreet and reliable officer from Halleck's staff carried a message to Major General George Gordon Meade at Frederick, not asking

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 177, 418-419; *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 58-60; pt. 3, pp. 314, 317, 344, 349, 352-354, 370. For the traditional and favorable interpretation of Hooker's conduct of the campaign up to his resignation, see John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (New York: Century, 1890), VII, 213-217. For the thesis commonly accepted by historians that the Lincoln administration, because of its lack of confidence in Hooker, maneuvered to put him in a position where he had no alternative but to resign, see an article by Charles F. Benjamin in *Battles and Leaders*, III, 239-243.

but ordering him to assume command of the Army of the Potomac. Completely surprised, Meade, who possessed a strong sense of duty, bowed to the inevitable.¹⁴ Lincoln knew his man and chose wisely. He thought "a great deal of that fine fellow Meade," he said,¹⁵ though he was never to establish the rather relaxed and informal relationship with him which he had with Hooker. The two men always went through channels, that is, through Halleck's office, which of course was very proper. Rather stiff and unbending, Meade had none of the charm and grace of Hooker but was all business. He had a distinguished war record and had gained the deep respect of his fellow soldiers, if not their love, as a man of ability and moral strength.

Lincoln gave Meade the same authority and responsibilities he had placed on Hooker, but with one important addition. In order to hasten Meade's adjustment to his new position and get the army rolling again, Lincoln provided him with the power to promote or remove any of his subordinates regardless of rank without having to seek the approval of the War Department. Hence Meade had the authority to send Winfield S. Hancock to Gettysburg on July 1 to replace the dead John F. Reynolds, although Hancock was outranked by Oliver O. Howard of the XI Corps, who had already assumed control of operations. Aside from this unusual feature of his instructions, Meade possessed no greater freedom in the development of the army and the use of the garrison at Maryland Heights than Hooker. Nor did Meade at the time of his appointment get more reinforcements of first-class troops than Hooker, because none were available.¹⁶

After Meade took charge of the army, Lincoln exercised restraint in the conduct of military affairs, though of course he remained vitally interested in what went on. Lee's invasion of the North naturally caused him many anxious moments, but it did not throw him into a state of panic as it did so many public figures, because he believed that once the main rebel army had gone north of the Potomac, it—in his words—"could never return, if well attended to." Firm in this conviction, the President was pleased by the outcome of the battle at Gettysburg but not especially surprised. He had expected his troops, led by an able Pennsylvanian, to fight

¹⁴ Meade, *Life and Letters*, II, 1-2.

¹⁵ Quoted in Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 334.

¹⁶ *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 61-63.

well, and they did. Meade brought them to the battlefield with a dispatch that amazed the Confederates and maneuvered them so skillfully during the last two days of the battle that all the enemy's attacks ended in failure and Lee realized he must retreat. Though most people considered the battle a great triumph, the President did not; and in a press release on July 4 he carefully avoided using the word "victory." Instead he said that news from the Army of the Potomac *promised* "a great success to the cause of the Union."¹⁷ In private conversations Lincoln expressed the thought that the Confederates were now in such a weakened condition that it would be no trick for Meade to follow up his advantage without delay and to inflict on them a final, decisive defeat. To ensure this result Lincoln could reveal that thousands of Union soldiers from the eastern shores of Virginia and North Carolina had been ordered to rush to Meade's support. Furthermore, a sizable force of infantry and cavalry under Brigadier General Benjamin Kelley was on its way from West Virginia to threaten Lee's rear, while over 20,000 of General Couch's Pennsylvania and New York State militia were moving along the Cumberland Valley on the Confederate left flank.

Other propitious signs pointed to the possibility of a quick annihilation of the Army of Northern Virginia. Union headquarters and journalists in the Valley reported that Lee's crippled army was severely hampered by its wagon trains as it retreated through the mountains. Then came word that a sudden rise in the waters of the Potomac and the destruction of the Confederates' only pontoon bridge had cut their route to Virginia. These fortuitous developments seemed to make Meade's catching Lee off balance and thrashing him beyond recovery a foregone conclusion.¹⁸

Lincoln's confidence in Meade's ability to achieve a quick and decisive victory received a rude shock from conversations he had with two Union officers. The first took place on Sunday, July 5, when the President visited his severely wounded friend, Major

¹⁷ Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, VI, 314, 341.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 318-320, 323, 327-328; *OR*, XVIII, pp. 652, 736-737; XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 79-80, 488-489; pt. 3, pp. 438, 442, 444-445; 450-451, 528, 547-551, 570, 575-576, 597-598, 600, 617-618, 625, 634, 644, 652, 680-681, 698-699, 703, 711, 795-799; Statement of Reinforcements which Joined the Army of the Potomac between 7th & 14th July, 1863, George Gordon Meade Papers. Historical Society of Pennsylvania; *New York Tribune*, July 10, 1863; J. W. De Peyster, *The Decisive Conflicts of the Late Civil War* (New York, 1867), p. 101; *CCW, Report*, I, 300, 316, 360.

General Dan Sickles, who had just returned to Washington from the battlefield. In answer to Lincoln's questions, Sickles, who was commander of the III Corps and a crony of Hooker, gave his version of the story of what had happened on July 2. He conveyed the impression that it was he who was largely responsible for the victory at Gettysburg because he had moved his corps out into the open and virtually challenged the enemy to attack him; furthermore, the cautious Meade had had no plan of battle and had wanted to retreat even before the fighting got started. Lincoln probably discounted a good portion of Sickles's statements and insinuations, but certainly what he heard must have given him pause.¹⁹

The next blow to Lincoln's hopes came from Brigadier General Herman Haupt, a brilliant engineer employed by the army to expedite and repair the railroads. On July 5, Haupt had taken it upon himself to visit his classmate, Meade, and see what the army was doing. He later informed the President that Meade was resting his men, even as Lee's broken forces were sneaking off across the mountains and down to the Potomac. Although his report was misleading and contained factual errors, it served to confirm Lincoln's growing doubts about Meade.²⁰

It so happened that on July 6, the very day of this conversation with Haupt, Lincoln read a copy of Meade's proclamation to his soldiers thanking them for the "glorious result" of recent operations, reminding them that their task remained unfinished, and urging them on to "greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader." This windy version of the old ringing battle cry of "drive the invader from our soil" may have been a good rhetorical device, but it dismayed Lincoln, for it seemed to him that Meade had lost sight of his true objective, the destruction of Lee's army. Working through Halleck, the President at once began to prod Meade, and on July 8 he sent him instructions to move against Lee by forced marches; if he did, there might still be time to catch the rebels in the process of crossing the river at Williamsport.²¹

¹⁹ W. A. Swanberg, *Sickles the Incredible* (New York: Scribner, 1956), pp. 221-223.

²⁰ Herman Haupt, *Reminiscences* (Milwaukee: Wright & Joys, 1901), XIV-XV, 220-229.

²¹ Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, VI, 318-319.

But appearances were deceiving. Even Lincoln with his rare ability to see many sides of a question oversimplified Meade's problems in the pursuit of the Confederates, and by misreading the general's intentions unwittingly did him an injustice. Supported by faulty information, Lincoln made questionable assumptions about the condition of the two armies, which became the basis of his impatience with Meade. For one thing, he wrongly concluded that Lee's army, far from its base of operations, had become a demoralized horde of fugitives. The truth was that although the Confederates were weary and had suffered grievous infantry losses, heavier perhaps than the records indicate, they still mustered at least 50,000 men who were well organized and well led by their regular commanders. Furthermore, they had enough artillery ammunition for one more day's heavy fighting. As for the cavalry, all of it had arrived from Virginia by July 3, strong enough to cope with its slightly larger Federal opponent. Lee's army, far from being ripe for the plucking, was still filled with confidence in itself and its general and had the determination and capacity to punish severely, if not to wreck, any incautious or unskilled foe who might pursue it.²²

While underestimating the hitting power of the Army of Northern Virginia, Lincoln exaggerated that of the Army of the Potomac. Casualties of 23,000 officers and men had reduced three of the seven corps to fractions of their former strength, and the whole army had lost its offensive punch. Even worse, the two commanders in whom Meade had had the greatest confidence were gone: Reynolds dead and Hancock severely wounded. Reinforcements of trained soldiers, moreover, were slow to arrive. Of the organized units counted upon by Lincoln to aid Meade, the most numerous, Couch's militia or emergency troops, were of such poor quality that Meade considered them worse than useless and refused to incorporate them into his army. Untrained, unreliable, poorly equipped, and lacking the supply services essential to active

²² *OR*, XXV, pt. 2, p. 846; XXVII, pt. 2, pp. 299, 309, 322, 346, 547; Fitzgerald Ross, *Cities and Camps of the Confederate States*, Richard B. Harwell, ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 70; James A. L. Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States: April-June, 1863* (New York, 1864), p. 273; Justus Scheibert, *Seven Months in the Rebel States during the North American War, 1863*, William Stanley Hoole, ed. (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Confederate Publishing Co., 1958), p. 119; A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Stoddard, 1886), p. 295.

campaigning, about all they were good for was to fill up space and cut down the area open to Southern foraging parties. Although the men under General Kelley were of better quality, they lacked the numbers—and the nerve—to offer a real threat to the Confederate rear. In the final reckoning, therefore, Meade could count only on the Army of the Potomac to achieve the destruction of Lee. This force on July 10 numbered no more than 80,000 officers and men as against at least 50,000 rebels.²³

Just as Meade's power to destroy Lee's army has been exaggerated, so have his efforts to pursue and corner him been unfairly indicted. Contrary to the President's belief, Meade *did* set out after Lee for the express purpose of battling him again, the sooner the better. As he wrote his wife, he would rather fight "at once . . . in Maryland than to follow in Virginia."²⁴ While letting his infantry rest on July 4, he was also waiting for greatly needed supplies to be hauled up by wagon from Westminster, twenty-five miles away. During that day Lee pulled back Richard S. Ewell's corps and formed a straight line along Seminary Ridge in the hope that Meade's infantry would attack his marksmen crouching behind stone walls and entrenchments. Meade refused to play his game and instead sent out seven of his eight cavalry brigades to strike at the enemy's rear and lines of communication. In the afternoon the Confederate general got his main wagon train off on the Chambersburg Pike and that night began moving his artillery and infantry over the Fairfield road, which was the shortest way through the mountains to the lower Cumberland Valley.²⁵

Meade had decided against a direct pursuit of Lee because he had been informed that the Confederates had fortified the passes west of Gettysburg. He planned instead to follow them on parallel routes east of the mountains, where the better surfaces and uncrowded conditions would enable him to travel faster. He would

²³ *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 114-115, 117, 152, 187; pt. 3, pp. 611, 644, 651, 677, 698-700; Statement of Reinforcements which Joined the Army of the Potomac between 7th and 14th July, 1863, George Gordon Meade Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁴ Meade, *Life and Letters*, II, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 125; Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States*, p. 271; Hotchkiss to his wife, July 5, 1863, Jedediah Hotchkiss Papers, Library of Congress; *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 78, 916; pt. 2, pp. 326-327, 346, 557; *Battles and Leaders*, III, 424; Patrick Journal, Entry for July 6, 1863, Library of Congress; *CCW, Report*, I, 334, 360.

have the added advantage of being able to establish his base at Frederick, which was on the railroad to Washington and Baltimore. Meanwhile his army would seize the passes west of Frederick and threaten Lee's left flank as he retreated toward the river.²⁶

Meade drew up orders for this movement early on July 5, but he held up its execution until he could learn the results of a reconnaissance by the VI Corps under Major General John Sedgwick. When he heard that evening that the main body of Lee's army was massed near Fairfield and seemed to be spoiling for a fight, he ordered Sedgwick to press forward vigorously in hopes of provoking a battle. As support for the VI he ordered up four other corps. When Sedgwick made only a feeble thrust, Lee decided the Union threat was a false alarm, and he continued to move down into the valley toward Hagerstown. Unfortunately Meade lost a whole day because of Sedgwick's shadow boxing. He made up for some of this time on the 7th by forced marches, when the army really began to stretch its legs and covered about thirty miles. Most of the infantry made a great swing to the right, bringing it by nightfall almost abreast of Middletown, Meade's first objective.²⁷

During the next five days, from July 8 to 13, Meade cautiously—perhaps too cautiously—advanced his army westward on a front between Hagerstown and Falling Waters on the Potomac. In the same interval the Confederates also kept busy. The flooding of the river prevented them from using the fords, but the situation did not appear to upset Lee. While his pontoon bridge was being repaired he used a ferry to send his wounded to Virginia and bring back ammunition. Like his opponent, he concentrated his forces in the area between Hagerstown and Falling Waters and built a fortified line six to eight miles long, which was later pronounced by Union officers as truly formidable. Remnants of it can be seen to this day.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 334; *OR*, XXVII, pt. 3, pp. 499, 515.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, pp. 80-82, 117, 145-146, 404, 408, 429, 536, 544, 556, 595, 621, 627, 633, 636, 663, 666-667, 670, 672, 692-694, 708, 733, 736, 741, 761, 771, 834, 838, 850, 859, 876; pt. 2, pp. 448, 471-472, 493; pt. 3, pp. 530-531, 535, 537, 554-562, 580-581, 587.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, pp. 86, 89-91; pt. 2, pp. 299-302, 704; pt. 3, p. 588; Memorandum Book, Entries for July 8-12, 1863, Jedediah Hotchkiss Papers, Library of Congress; Allan Nevins, ed., *A Diary of Battle: The Personal*

On July 12 the two armies confronted each other once more. Meade's poised for the offensive and Lee's set to receive the shock. Meade in consultation with his new chief of staff, Major General A. A. Humphreys, outlined a proposal to send about a third of his army to probe Lee's defenses in a so-called reconnaissance in force, while the rest of his men would move up close to take advantage of any breakthrough. Did Humphreys think it was a propitious moment for such a move? Humphreys, a superb soldier, endorsed the idea enthusiastically, but that night an overwhelming majority of the corps commanders turned thumbs down on the suggestion. Meade, perhaps to his discredit, gave in weakly to their recommendation and delayed the advance for a day in order to examine the ground more carefully. But by that time it was too late, and he found empty entrenchments. The flood waters had receded from the ford at Williamsport, engineers had repaired the pontoon bridge, and before dawn on the 14th Lee had tiptoed most of his men across the river to Virginia.²⁹

Meade's unfortunate moment of hesitation gave his reputation a blow from which it never fully recovered. Lincoln was extremely annoyed and never forgave the general for not venturing an attack of some sort when he seemed to have the opportunity.³⁰ That the opportunity was as great as Lincoln thought is a matter of doubt. The Confederate fortifications would very likely have stopped a Union assault with heavy losses. On the other hand, if Meade had succeeded in breaking Lee's lines, there is little likelihood—contrary to the Lincoln thesis—that he could have annihilated the enemy and ended the war right there. As General Humphreys observed, an army as large as Lee's could not have been "knocked

Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861-1865 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. 261-262; A. A. Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan, The Army of the Potomac, July, 1863, to April, 1864* (New York: Scribner, 1883), pp. 4-5; Scheibert, *Seven Months in the Rebel States*, Hoole, ed., p. 121; CCW, *Report*, I, 336, 462; Henry J. Hunt to Webb, January 19, 1888, Alexander S. Webb Collection, Yale University Library.

²⁹ *OR*, XXVII, pt. 1, pp. 91-92, 667, 675; pt. 2, pp. 323, 361-362, 448-449, 640, 705; pt. 3, pp. 683, 686; CCW, *Report*, I, 336, 360, 379-381, 396-398, 415-416, 462-463; Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan*, p. 6; Meade to Mrs. Meade, July 12, 1863, George Gordon Meade Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Scheibert, *Seven Months in the Rebel States*, Hoole, ed., pp. 121-122; Long, *Memoirs of Lee*, p. 300.

³⁰ Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time*, Mitgang, ed., p. 94; Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 353-355.

in pieces" and kept from rallying again, especially in the broken country of western Maryland.³¹

In his own appraisal of the campaign Lincoln held to the conviction that Meade could easily have trapped Lee. Sometime after the engagement the President met Meade and asked: "Do you know, General, what your attitude toward Lee after the Battle of Gettysburg reminded me of?" "No, Mr. President, what was it?" answered the general. "I'll be hanged if I could think of anything but an old woman trying to shoo her geese across the creek."³² Lincoln's imagery came close to the truth as he saw it. Since he was so concerned about the pursuit of Lee, it might have been well had he resumed his practice of inspecting the army after a crucial battle. A visit to Meade similar to the one he paid Hooker after Chancellorsville might well have changed the verdict of history and given posterity a more just estimate of Meade's generalship.

³¹ CCW, *Report*, I, 398.

³² Quoted in Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 436.