

A Failure to Communicate

Gen Lee's blunder to convey his strategic purpose at Gettysburg and the modern relevancy of the doctrine of commander's intent

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In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln stated, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."¹ While he was wrong on the first account—Lincoln's Gettysburg Address remains one of most revered speeches in American history—Lincoln was prescient on the second account: the Nation has not forgotten what the soldiers accomplished and sacrificed on the battlefields of Gettysburg.² Arguably, the Gettysburg Campaign remains the preeminent Civil War event that war historians, military professionals, and Civil War enthusiasts study.³ Quite possibly, the stories of battlefield decisions and combat sacrifices that took place on the hills of Gettysburg have been fully accounted.⁴

For strategic leaders and operational planners, one could ask what possible further military lessons could be learned from the Gettysburg Campaign for today's technologically advanced, extremely lethal, and highly professionalized U.S. Armed Forces? Widening the aperture, Gen Robert E. Lee's campaign decision to launch a northern invasion and then engage the Union Army at Gettysburg provides greater insight than just reviewing operational maneuvers and military tactics. It reminds strategists and planners alike that the challenge of military command involves a human element, where command relationships are an enduring constant in war. In one aspect of modern military doctrine regarding "commander's intent," Gen Lee's failure to convey his strategic purpose to his generals, spe-

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cifically Gen James Longstreet, may have been his biggest mistake during the Gettysburg Campaign. Perhaps, it is the biggest lesson to be learned by present day military professionals.

Like military campaigns executed over a 150 years ago, modern commanders and their planners must communicate a clearly defined intent to achieve their desired strategic end state. Modern joint doctrine fully endorses the concept of "commander's intent." *Joint Publication 3-0, Doctrine for Joint Operations*, defines commander's intent, in part, as "a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state."⁵ Joint doctrine further articulates:

Commander's intent supports mission command and allows subordinates the greatest possible freedom of action. It provides focus to the staff and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's desired results without further orders once the operation begins, even when the operation does not unfold as planned.⁶

To this effect, doctrine alludes to the need for effective communication by stressing, "Well-crafted commander's

intent improves subordinates' situational awareness, which enables effective actions in fluid, chaotic situations."⁷

Looking back with this modern doctrinal perspective, a few questions arise when analyzing the Gettysburg Campaign. Did Gen Lee express a campaign intent? If he had one, did he promulgate it to his subordinate generals or did he just assume they knew it? Moreover, did Lee's communication of his northern invasion intent, or lack thereof, play a significant factor in the Gettysburg Campaign?

The confusion of commander's intent manifests itself after the first day of fierce fighting at Gettysburg. By the evening of 1 July, the day's combat appeared to have favored the Army of Northern Virginia.⁸ However, the Union Army of the Potomac retained the high ground, and Lee knew he must dislodge the enemy to carry the battle.⁹

That evening, Gen Lee and Gen Longstreet held a conversation to assess options. At that point, the Army of Northern Virginia had three strategic options: withdraw, defend, or attack. Longstreet argued to withdraw from their position, seek a more defensive location, and force the Union Army to attack.¹⁰ Lee, on the other hand,

was committed to maintaining the offensive.¹¹ What accounts for these two generals coming to such divergent strategic positions? Was it personality differences or testament of wills? Alternately, was it that Lee failed to convey his strategic intent to Longstreet? This variance in opinions was not just about battlefield tactics. What is strikingly revealed during this exchange is that the commanding general and his most trusted battlefield general at the time held diametrically different ideas on the strategic purpose of the Gettysburg Campaign.

Before considering Lee's and Longstreet's views, the first question to ask is should the generals have chosen to defend their position? By the end of the first day of fighting, the Confederate Army had seized the offensive and held, arguably, a secure-enough tactical position on Seminary Ridge. However, on the operational level, the invading army's position was at a distinct disadvantage deep in enemy territory. While holding out for an attack, the Northern Army of the Potomac would amass and concentrate greater numbers of forces on Gettysburg, drawing Union soldiers from the surrounding northern areas. On the other side, the Army of Northern Virginia would remain at their current troop levels: Lee would get no reinforcements.¹² Compounding the issue was the matter of logistics as Lee's soldiers needed food and supplies.¹³ Holding their position hindered the army's ability to forage for food and exposed its overstretch lines of communications.¹⁴ These factors militated against holding a defensive line.¹⁵ The odds only grew against the Confederate Army the longer Southern soldiers maintained a tactical defensive posture. Thus, the realistic options were whether to withdraw or attack.

Going back to Lee's conversation with Longstreet on the evening of 1 July, up until that time, both generals seemed to be of one mind:

In broad, general outline, Longstreet and Lee shared similar beliefs: direct attacks cost too many casualties, the South cannot win a war of attrition, the North must be outgeneraled on its own ground.¹⁶

Gen Lee, arguably, favored Longstreet's military advice above all his commanders in the Army of Northern Virginia, complimenting Longstreet as his "Old Warhorse" and "the staff in my right hand."¹⁷ However, at this time, Lee rebuked Longstreet's recommendations to resume the tactical defensive.

When Lee asked Longstreet for his military advice, Longstreet pointed out that the Union Army controlled the high ground, maintained interior lines, and likely outnumbered the southern troops.¹⁸ Longstreet recommended leaving the battlefield, maneuvering between the Union Army and Washington, and compelling the North to attack the Confederate Army on its chosen high ground.¹⁹ But these observations did not move Lee.²⁰ After all, since taking over the Army of Northern Virginia in June 1862, Lee had experienced four major campaign wins (Seven Days Battle, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville), no losses, and one draw (Antietam).²¹ The current battlefield posed no appreciable tactical disadvantage than those other battles, where Lee's army was always outnumbered.²² Gen Lee felt he had the advantage; he felt he had the momentum; and he felt confident he could win with his army.²³ Lee's response to Longstreet was definitive and curt: "No, the enemy is there, and I am going to attack him there."²⁴

Gen Lee was convinced that to win the war, "the Confederacy must do more than defend its capital at Richmond, more than to smash enemy armies in Virginia. The Confederacy must conquer; it must win victories on Northern ground."²⁵ Lee's strategic goal was to destroy the Army of the Potomac.²⁶ Longstreet's suggestion to stage a strictly defensive battlefield posture did not accomplish Lee's desired strategic results. Perhaps Lee could have maneuvered to a more formidable defensive position. However, Lee firmly believed that holding the ground in the tactical defense would not accomplish his strategic intent of destroying the enemy's army.²⁷

The questions to ask: How is it that Longstreet did not know Lee's strategic mind? For if Longstreet, a general who has been fighting alongside Gen Lee

since the Peninsula Campaign, did not understand Lee's strategic intent, how did anyone else? At Gettysburg, the two could not have been farther apart in the meeting of the mind. Longstreet was thinking in the purely tactical realm. For him, "the whole purpose of the campaign had been to seek an excellent defensive position in the strategic location that would force the Army of the Potomac to attack."²⁸ However, Lee felt that Longstreet's view did not bring victory. A war of attrition, with the Confederate casualty rate, was a losing strategy even if battles were won. Instead, Lee was thinking in the realm of strategy and operations, more specifically, how his operational campaign of invading the North would achieve the Confederacy's end state. For Lee, "to succeed, the campaign could not remain one of maneuver; the fulfillment of Lee's design demanded a climactic, Napoleonic battle."²⁹

In the end, it was Gen Lee's fault for not conveying his commander's intent to Longstreet. Lee assumed that Longstreet knew his intent. He simply expected—that after a year and a half of combat—his chief subordinate officer would intuitively know his strategy and intent. From this, Lee may have assumed that all his lieutenants knew that his previous major battles would convey that he was not simply trying to drive the Army of the Potomac out of Virginia, but to destroy the Union Army. However, Lee's tense exchange with Longstreet after the first day of fighting at Gettysburg revealed his assumptions were wrong.

When it comes to conveying commander's intent, the lesson at Gettysburg is self-evident: Gen Longstreet did not know or failed to grasp Gen Lee's strategic vision. Simply put, Lee's warhorse general, and likely all his officers during the Gettysburg Campaign, did not fully comprehend their commander's intent. In the monumental and historic Battle of Gettysburg, this may have cost the Confederacy the most. This lesson cannot be lost on future military campaigns. In short, the commander's intent matters.

Communication is key to an actionable and effective commander's intent.

For the modern military commander, they need to ask themselves: How do you pass along commander's intent in armed conflict? A simple bullet on a PowerPoint slide or a one-liner in a planning order is not enough. Moreover, joint commanders cannot just assume that their intent is grasped by their field officers or that it is widely known by their Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Coast Guardsman, and Marines. Rather, to be effective, commanders must promote their strategic intent often, consistently, and relentlessly.

Notes

1. Gettysburg Address, final text, *reprinted* in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
2. Diana Schaub, "Lincoln at Gettysburg," *National Affairs*, (Washington, DC: National Affairs, Inc., Spring 2014), available at <https://www.nationalaffairs.com>.
3. Richard Sauer, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June 3-August 1, 1863: A Comprehensive, Selectively Annotated Bibliography*, (Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 2004); listing over 6,000 books and articles on the Battle of Gettysburg.
4. Scott Bowden and Bill Ward, *Last Chance for Victory: Robert E. Lee and The Gettysburg Campaign*, (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).
5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Pub. 3-0, Joint Operations*, (Washington, DC: January 2017).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Williamson Murray and Wayne We-Sang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
9. Ibid.
10. Murray.
11. Ibid.
12. Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Son, 1998).
13. Russel F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973).
14. Ibid.
15. In his own words, Gen Lee later reported:
It had not been intended to fight a general battle at such a distance from our base, unless attacked by the enemy, but finding ourselves unexpectedly confronted by the Federal Army, it became a matter of difficulty to withdraw through the mountains with our large trains. At the same time, the country was unfavorable for collecting supplies ... a battle thus became, in a measure, unavoidable.
Quoted in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1889).
16. William L. Richter, "The Road to Hell Is Paved with Good Intentions: James Longstreet in War and Peace," in *Lee and His Generals*, ed. by Hewitt and Schott, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2012).
17. Ibid.
18. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988).
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative: Volume 2: Fredericksburg to Meridian*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1983).
22. Ibid.
23. *The American Way of War*; and *Battle Cry of Freedom*.
24. *The Civil War: A Narrative: Volume 2*.
25. *The American Way of War*.
26. *Battle Cry of Freedom*.
27. *The American Way of War*.
28. *A Savage War*.
29. *The American Way of War*.

