The Battle of Gettysburg: Did Lee Have A Choice?

Reuben D. Ferguson
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Dr. Stephen Engle
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**Frontispiece: Pickett’s Charge**

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HEADQUARTERS FOURTEENTH ARMY CORPS,  
Pennington's House, July 4, 1863...-12.15 p.m.

Major-General ROUSSEAU,  
Commanding First Division:  

Report from department headquarters is that after three days' hard fighting, Lee and his rebel host have been completely routed. General Rosecrans gives permission to fire a national salute on the strength of the report, after getting into camp.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

[GEO. E. FLYNT,]
Assistant Adjutant-General and Chief of Staff.

With this brief report, George E. Flynt described Gettysburg, the largest battle of the Civil War. Although his assessment of the state of Robert E. Lee’s rebel host was certainly overstated, (the Army of Northern Virginia was hardly completely routed, the phrase three days hard fighting is just as certainly a gross understatement.

Often characterized as the high-water mark of the Confederacy, much discussion has centered upon the importance of the battle, the possible errors made by various participants on both sides, and the innumerable examples of bravery, sacrifice, and valor displayed by individuals in defense of their cause. Many interesting ideas and theories have been presented over the years concerning what might have been the result of the battle if things had been slightly different. One must be cautious; it is all too easy for one to take the stance that it was obviously a mistake for Lee to fight at Gettysburg because he lost, but if only ... (the reader may insert any number of different events or decisions here) had happened, it could have led to a Confederate victory. Although, of
course, only speculation, this would seem to be true enough.

However, it would also seem that some broader questions should be asked: should Lee have fought at all in Gettysburg? Was there no alternative? Could his stated objective - winning the war through a forced negotiation or outright victory - have been accomplished without committing to a large-scale engagement at that crossroads?

This paper will examine various works of several historians and their attitudes (if any can be detected in their writings), concerning the wisdom of engaging in battle at all at that time and place. A necessarily brief description of the battle in Chapter 1 will be followed by an examination of the writings of some of the historians concerned with the Civil War in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will present the conclusions arrived at by this author.
Chapter One
The Battle of Gettysburg

Neither side had intended to fight a major engagement at Gettysburg. Lee’s secretary wrote that the general had mentioned Gettysburg or York as possible sites for a battle, but no specific plans were ever made. The general intent was simply to draw Union troops away from Washington so that they could be defeated without being able to retreat into that city, as had happened before. After the Army of the Potomac had been eliminated as a threat, Lee’s army (or other forces, perhaps under General Beauregard) could directly threaten and attack Washington, and quite possibly win the war.¹

Lee’s forces had been divided into three main groups: Longstreet’s forces comprising some 17,233 men and 87 cannon; Richard S. Ewell with 18,770 soldiers and 78 cannon; and Ambrose P. Hill with 20,119 men and 84 guns. J.E.B. Stuart’s cavalry, which included 8,665 men and 15 guns, were an independent force as was Imboden with 2,099 soldiers. All told, approximately 66,886 men and 264 field pieces made up the invading Confederate forces. Arrayed against them would be a force under George Gordon Meade, who had recently assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Meade’s army was divided into seven corps: John F. Reynolds with 11,555 men and 28 guns; Winfield S. Hancock with 10,196 men and 28 cannon; Daniel E. Sickles who had 10,008 men and 30 cannon; George Sykes with 10,371 soldiers and 26 guns; John Sedgewick with 12,446 men and 46 guns; Oliver O. Howard with 8,298 soldiers and 26 cannon; W.H. Slocum with 9,167 men and 20 guns; and Alfred Pleasonton who commanded 11,700 cavalrmen and had 44 cannon at his disposal. The Union forces would reach 83,741 men and 358 cannon, 110 of which were to be held
in reserve. Not all of these forces would engage in battle simultaneously; they would trickle into the Gettysburg area over the course of the three-day duration of hostilities. With 16,855 fewer men and 94 fewer field pieces, Lee would have to array his forces very carefully. Of course, these precise figures were not available at the time; and lacking intelligence from Stuart as to location and numbers, Lee simply had to take his best guess regarding the forces arrayed against him.²

The battle started when Union cavalry under John Buford sighted Confederate forces under Harry Heth (part of A.P. Hill’s command) to the northwest of the town of Gettysburg. Buford fought a brilliant delaying action which was aided by Lee’s uncertainty as to the location and extent of forces available to the Union. Heth’s men were looking for shoes, not a battle, and although it was not surprising that they had met Federal forces, at first no one guessed the real significance of the meeting. By midnight on July 1, the Confederate forces had advanced into the town of Gettysburg, but had not managed to occupy the high ground to the south of the town.³

Twenty-four hours later, the Union forces had formed what has been widely described as a fish-hook shaped line of battle with the left flank anchored on Little Round Top to the south and
the right flank holding Culp’s Hill to the east. Heavy fighting took place on the extreme left flank, and the Confederates almost succeeded in gaining what would have been an excellent position from which they could have rolled up the Union line. Thanks to the quick-witted responses of General G.K. Warren and Colonel Strong Vincent, and the heroic action of the 20th Maine under former Professor of Rhetoric at Bowden College Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the Southern forces were prevented from gaining the advantage.⁴

Lee’s forces were equally unsuccessful in assaulting the right flank. Thanks largely to the skill of General George S. Greene, (part of Slocum’s command), the battle for Culp’s Hill was ultimately decided in favor of the Union army. The attempt to overwhelm the Union right flank was the longest sustained action of the battle.⁵

Unable to dislodge the Union forces on either flank, on July 3 Lee instructed Longstreet to make a massive frontal charge against the Union center, expecting it to be more lightly defended than the two ends. This order would result in Pickett’s Charge, a gallant but doomed effort to rout the Army of the Potomac. Pickett’s forces managed to briefly gain the heights of Cemetery Ridge, but were quickly repulsed and shortly forced to retreat with heavy losses. Realizing that further attacks would be fruitless and potentially disastrous, Lee pulled his forces away from the battlefield and retreated back across the Potomac, ending the last best hope for Confederate victory in the war.⁶
Chapter 2
Opinions

There is, of course, no shortage of writers who have found the battle of Gettysburg to be irresistibly attractive as a subject, and that is entirely understandable given the scope and importance of the outcome. Each author has attempted to cover some aspect or view of the battle in his or her own way. An examination of some of the works of some of these historians may help in determining where the truth lies.

It Was Inevitable ...

Writing in the period between 1870 and 1888, Colonel G.F.R. Henderson, an officer in the English army, asserted that Lee really had little choice about a battle at Gettysburg. Henderson did concede that General Longstreet and others had insisted there were at least three other alternatives to a fight at that particular place:

1st, to retire to the passes of the South Mountain, and thus to compel Meade to attack him in a very favorable position.
2nd, to await attack in his present position.
3rd, to move round the left flank of the Federal position and to interpose between the Federal army and Washington, taking up a strong position; and if Meade refused to attack, to move back in the direction of Washington, which threat to the capital would probably induce the Northern general to do so.¹

Henderson, referring to a report by Lee, discounts the first two possibilities by pointing out
that Lee’s army had to keep moving; a motionless army would very soon run short of supplies. The third alternative, which was strongly favored by Longstreet, was dismissed by Lee as being impracticable. Henderson squarely lays the blame of its impracticability at the feet of Lee’s errant cavalry officer, Stuart. The Army of Northern Virginia could have been walking into other, unknown, Union forces had Lee attempted to flank Meade’s army. Henderson clearly shows his opinion that Lee had to fight at Gettysburg.²

In The Times of London, the English public was kept informed of the American Civil War. The newspaper was supplied with information by Antonio Gallenga, a correspondent who traveled along with Longstreet’s headquarters. On July 1, relating the mood of the Confederate troops upon their realization that the Federal troops were close at hand, Gallenga writes:

A cry for immediate battle louder and more peremptory than ever ascended from the Highlanders of Claverhouse or Montrose swelled the gale - timid and hesitating counsels were impatiently discarded; and as it appeared to me, the mature and cautious wisdom of General Lee had no choice but to float with the current, and to trust the enthusiasm of his troops to carry him triumphantly on the morrow over the heights which frowned darkly and menacingly in our front.³

A somewhat different opinion is displayed by Bruce Catton in This Hallowed Ground, but he also claims that Lee really had no choice but to fight at Gettysburg. Catton takes the attitude that battle was unavoidable at that particular place simply because it was where the opposing armies first made real contact:

All of Lee’s army was north of the Potomac by now, connected with its
southern bases by the thinnest of threads; it was on its own in a strange land, scooping up supplies from the fat Pennsylvania farming country, driven by an inexorable compulsion - lacking a supply line, it must eternally keep moving, because if it did not it would starve, and whenever and wherever if found its enemy it must strike without delay, no matter how the odds might look.4

Oddly enough, in a footnote included in Frank Haskell’s *The Battle of Gettysburg* which was edited by Catton and which was published in the same year as the above quote, he restates his opinion that Lee had no alternative to fighting the battle, but now attributes that to the fact that Stuart had left Lee fighting blind. Catton argues that Stuart had slightly misjudged the position of the Union army and did not rejoin Lee until the battle was well under way. Because of Stuart’s error, Lee did not realize the extent or positions of the force he was to fight:

If [Stuart] had been with Lee throughout, the campaign might well have taken a very different form. In Stuart’s absence, Lee moved blindly, and the fight at Gettysburg was in a sense forced upon him.5

Another opinion presented by Catton appears in his book *Never Call Retreat* which was published in 1965, some years after the previous comments:

The armies met [at Gettysburg] by accident, led together by the turns of the roads they followed. When they touched they began to fight, because the tension was so high that the first contact snapped it, and once begun the fight was uncontrollable. What the generals intended ceased to matter; each man had to cope with what he got, which was the most momentous battle of the war.6
These statements, while not necessarily mutually exclusive, would seem to indicate a certain indecisiveness in Catton’s convictions concerning the reasons for the inevitability of the battle.

Later still in 1974, Catton appears to have tried to tie up these loose ends in *Gettysburg: The Final Fury* where he devotes the entire first chapter of the book to addressing the question. On the very first page he states:

> It took a strange combination of forces to bring about the terrible battle of Gettysburg. No one of these, taken by itself, was strong enough to cause such a cataclysm. Only when they were arranged together in proper sequence did these forces become deadly.\(^7\)

And ...

> It was compounded partly of geography, which is to say the armies fought at Gettysburg because the roads led them there. Sheer chance played its part in this; if various circumstances had been just a little different the unremarkable Pennsylvania market town would have remained at peace and the armies would have gone elsewhere.\(^8\)

Finally, he writes ...

> ...the battle was fated ... It was a battle that had to be fought ... it is still worth while to see why this great fight took place at Gettysburg instead of in some other town, on the first three days of July, 1863 instead of some other time.\(^9\)

Statements that the battle at Gettysburg as it happened was not what Lee originally had in mind are presented by Richard Wheeler in *Witness to Gettysburg*:

> [Lee’s] plan from the start had been to combine an offensive strategy with defensive tactics. If a major confrontation developed, which he knew was likely, he
expected to enjoy the advantage of choosing the battlefield, and he meant this to be a spot where he could set up a strong defense and await attack. In order for his scheme to succeed he had to keep abreast of the enemy's whereabouts, and he intended to rely on Jeb Stuart to provide this information.  

Once again, the fault is directed primarily at Stuart, but Wheeler mitigates Stuart's error by adding that Lee should have known better, and kept a tighter rein on his able but sometimes impulsive cavalry chief.  

Another opinion related by Wheeler quotes John Gordon, a Confederate officer:

I expressed to my staff the opinion that if the battle should be fought at Gettysburg, the army which held the heights would probably be the victor.  

Holding the high ground is such a basic premise of any military campaign that it is difficult to comprehend any situation where its value would be questioned or disregarded. Yet, Wheeler relates a statement by Lee in which the general seems to feel that he might have to fight at Gettysburg, whether he liked it or not. Lamenting his lack of knowledge from and about Stuart, Lee declares:

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 ...  

In Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide, Champ Clark echoes many of the statements and opinions forwarded by others. He states that both the Union and Confederate armies were pulled
into fighting at Gettysburg as if by a directing destiny. Clark goes on to argue that neither side was prepared for or had intended a fight to take place at Gettysburg, and describes the battle as uncontrolled and uncontrollable, but neglects to offer any explanation for the inevitability of the conflict at that place.  

Harry W. Pfanz also assumes that Lee really had no choice in the battle, at least by the third day. In *Gettysburg: The Third Day* he mentions Longstreet’s persistence in believing a flanking movement was preferable over Lee’s plan. After first admitting that Longstreet’s ideas made a lot of sense in the abstract, he makes very plain his opinion on the matter, hammering away with a barrage of questions:  

Had the Army of Northern Virginia been able to maneuver as he suggested, his prediction would have been realized. But could it? What route could have been taken in making the maneuver? How long would it have taken? Who would have screened the Confederate army’s advance and covered its left during the move? What would have been done with the miles of wagons in the army’s trains that had been hauled so laboriously over South Mountain and were scattered over the fields north and west of Gettysburg?  

And what of the Federals? Where were they? Was it not possible that some of them would be off in the direction of the proposed movement and be able to stop or slow it? Those met that day in battle had fought hard and had roughly handled Heth, Pender, and Rode divisions; was it likely that General Meade would sit quietly by as the Confederate army slipped around his flank?  

Obviously, Pfanz has some problems with Longstreet’s ideas.
Not Inevitable, But Inadvisable

A slightly different attitude seems to be displayed by James M. McPherson in *The Atlas of the Civil War*. In describing the events leading up to the battle, he writes:

... Lee learned on this day [June 28] that the Federal Army was at Frederick, and that Hooker had been replaced by General Meade. Lee *decided* to bring his entire army east of the mountains and *offer* battle [italics added].

Even though he was the editor of this work and probably not the actual author of this passage, with his acceptance of the use of the words *decided* and *offer*, McPherson gives no hint of the opinion that battle at Gettysburg was inevitable. He does not, however, speculate that a different decision should, or could, have been made.

In *The Third Day of Gettysburg and Beyond*, editor Gary W. Gallagher relates quotes from several individuals. Although the intent of this collection was to show that the South did not consider Gettysburg to be as crushing a defeat as did most Northerners, (indeed, some Southerners considered it a mild victory), many of these quotes show that some, at least, had different opinions about the wisdom of the battle. In the section of the book actually written by him, *Lee's Army Has Not Lost Any of Its Prestige* Gallagher writes:

Lee's performance elicited criticism from a variety of individuals. Robert G.H. Kean confided to his diary on July 26 that *Gettysburg has shaken my faith in Lee as a general.* Calling the battle *worse in execution than in plan,* Kean thought it *the worst disaster which has ever befallen our arms.* Maj. Eugene Blackford of the 5th Alabama announced bitterly that his *blind confidence in Gen. Lee is utterly gone.* To hurl his Army against an enemy entrenched on a mountain top, it exceeds my belief. In another harsh appraisal, Brig. Gen. Wade Hampton labeled the
campaign a complete failure and deplored Lee’s assaults against a position that was the strongest I ever saw. Some soldiers cloaked criticisms in more gentle language, as when Alexander McNeil of Joseph B. Kershaw’s brigade stated that our wise Gen. Lee made a great mistake in making the attack.

Gallegher also points out that others had a different opinion; for example on July 13 the Richmond (Daily) Dispatch argued that the Battle of Gettysburg was, on our part, a triumphant success - an overwhelming victory. Admittedly, the paper was known for its pro-administration leanings. The author goes on to make a convincing argument in support of his premise, but the general feeling that fighting at Gettysburg was an error for Lee is nowhere denied, and judging from the tone of the work rather than any specifics, Gallagher would seem to agree that there may have been alternatives.

*Pickett’s Charge In History and Memory* by Carol Reardon is almost completely devoted to an examination of that particular portion of Gettysburg, but she does attribute the third day of battle to Lee’s unwillingness to break off the engagement. She mentions the previously discussed options of waiting for Meade to attack the Confederate army or attempting a run around the enemy’s left flank. Reardon quotes Lee: ‘The enemy is there and I am going to strike him.’ She continues by pointing out that this was a result of Lee’s continuing offensive-mindedness and his adherence to the prevailing military school of thought that held that a defensive posture never won decisive battles. This attitude would seem to be at odds with any assumption of inevitability.

As Shelby Foote relates in *The Civil War: A Narrative*, Lee’s decisions leading to the three day battle were clear and deliberate. As the situation changed and Lee was trying to make sense out
of the meager information available to him, he repeatedly made decision after decision which would further involve his army in the battle. Although Foote is careful to not imply judgement either way, he does not state that the battle was inevitable. Rather, by detailing Lee’s actions, he leaves it to his readers to decide for themselves the reasons for those actions.25

Yet another insight into Lee’s thoughts are supplied by Major General Isaac Ridgeway Trimble in *High Tide at Gettysburg*. In this work, author Glenn Tucker describes Lee’s thoughts as he lays out his plan to Trimble. Telling Trimble his intention of hitting the Federals repeatedly until their army was destroyed, he then received assurance from Trimble that the plan was sound. Lee touched the map at Gettysburg and proclaimed:

Hereabout we shall probably meet the enemy and fight a great battle, and if God gives us the victory, the war will be over and we shall achieve the recognition of our independence.26

It would seem that Lee was determined to give battle, and made a conscious decision to do so. Tucker gives no hint of a feeling of inevitability, instead portraying the battle as the result of intent by the leader of the Army of Northern Virginia.
Conclusions

HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA,
Near Hagerstown, Md., July 8, 1863.

Mr. PRESIDENT: My letter of yesterday will have informed you of the position of this army. Though reduced in numbers by the hardships and battles through which it has passed since leaving the Rappahannock, its condition is good, and its confidence unimpaired.

I hope Your Excellency will understand that I am not in the least discouraged, or that my faith in the protection of an all-merciful Providence, or in the fortitude of this army, is at all shaken. But, though conscious that the enemy has been much shattered in the recent battle, I am aware that he can be easily re-enforced, while no addition can be made to our numbers. The measure, therefore, that I have recommended is altogether one of a prudential nature.

I am, most respectfully, your obedient servant,

R. E. LEE,
General.

It is difficult to detect a pattern in the materials examined. Many of the sources consulted shed no light on the question at all. The attitude of inevitability was most evident in the older works, but was by no means confined to those earlier authors. Several later historians also felt that Lee had little or no choice in the selection of the point of battle, but the concept that there may have been alternatives seems to have gained a small amount of credence as time passed. The only opinion which seems to have fallen completely out of favor is that of divine predestination. However, that being said, it must also be stated that there was never any strong defense of the possible alternatives which were discussed in many of the sources. No one came forward to champion the opinions of Longstreet, or to chastise Lee for ignoring them. No author, with the exception of Bruce Catton, spent any significant amount of space puzzling over the military problem presented to Lee when he was making his decision. Most of the historians seemed to accept with little debate that the course that Lee pursued was obviously the best way of attempting to achieve his
objectives; instead, most writers were more concerned with addressing the perceived errors on the part of the Confederate forces in carrying out the intentions of Lee.

Time and again, Stuart was called to task for his failure to keep Lee fully informed, and his absence was used repeatedly to defend and justify the actions of Lee. Lee was also criticized, mildly, for his lack of firmness and/or detail when delivering orders and expectations to his subordinates. Taken as a whole, the general attitude shared by the majority of historians, authors, and contemporaries was that Lee had a choice, and based on the information available to him at the time, made the best decision that he was capable of making. In that sense the Battle of Gettysburg was, indeed, inevitable.

It must be stated that this author remains unconvinced, but that is a subject for a future paper.
Appendix 1
Officers at the Battle of Gettysburg
U.S.A.
C.S.A.
Appendix 2
Map of the Gettysburg Area

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Notes

Introduction


Chapter One: The Battle of Gettysburg


In the following excerpt from a letter to Rev. J. Wm. Jones, D.D., Secretary of the Southern Historical Society written in Charlottesville, Va., April, 1877, Long says:

... I will repeat in substance the remarks of General Lee, when the invasion of the North was under consideration -- "Should we defeat General Hooker in a general engagement south of the Potomac anywhere in the vicinity of Washington, his shattered army would find refuge within the defences of that city, as two Federal armies have previously done, and the fruits of victory would again be lost. But should we draw him far away from the defences of his capital, and defeat him on a field of our own choosing, his army would be irretrievably lost, and the victory would be attended with results of the utmost importance." Gettysburg and York were designated as points suitable for such a battle.

A.L. Long,  
Military Secretary of General R.E. Lee.


Chapter 2: Opinions


2. Ibid., 235.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 91.

12. Ibid., 112.

13. Ibid., 140.


15. Ibid., 12.

17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 20-21.


24. Reardon, 5.


Conclusions

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