

Lost Triumph Lecture
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Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg
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I have come to believe over the years that revisionism, while a valuable historic tool, is a double edged sword. There are fashions in historical interpretation, the way there are fashions in clothing, architecture, art, and entertainment. Historical interpretation can be cyclical and relative. Many revisionist historians seem to judge other times, places, and people using our current 21st century mores and values. This is voodoo history often ignoring the realities and the context of the times and lives they are examining. Often blatantly ignoring facts to prove arguments. Revisionism often debunks myth only to replace it with different myths, and not realistic views. These revisionist theories often don't add to our understanding, but polarize our views and beliefs eliminating the rational and reasonable. These replacement myths often reflect some new political belief or fashion in our current world rather than an accurate reinterpretation of the historic period they are purported to examine more accurately. Historical figures cannot be judged out of the context of their times and societies. The old saying, a great man's vices are the vices of his age and his virtues are his own. This may not sit well with the politically correct, but like many old sayings, this contains a significant truth. It is valuable to debunk mythological conceptions about the world's great figures, to re-examine the past, and to try to view the past more realistically and less idealistically, however, it becomes an exercise in ignorance and hypocrisy when we disregard the facts about historical environments and try to measure historical figures out of their context and against our own times. To judge a figure historically takes not only an in-depth knowledge of that person's life, but also an in-depth knowledge of their times, and the world as it was around them.

Historical revisionists have been focusing their sights upon the American Civil War since Lee and Grant met at Appomattox. The myths of the Lost Cause, the War of Northern Aggression, and the War of Southern Rebellion, to name a few myths, all have their political

supporters and purposes. Since the 1970s and 80s the assault against the idealization of Robert E. Lee has consumed reams of historic journals, books, reprints, and at times the best sellers list. This revisionism began in earnest with the publication of Thomas Lawrence Connelly's, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and his image in American Society*; Alan T. Nolan's book, *Lee Considered* (which I must say I found ill-considered. Though Nolan had his points I felt he ignored the context of the 19c society and world in which Lee lived his life) and most influential in the popular imagination and downward spiral of Lee's reputation and the rejuvenation of Longstreet's, Michael Shaara's *Killer Angels*. This is the book that perpetrated a new myth and currently fuels the majority thinking that Lee lost it all at Gettysburg, rolling the dice with the ill fated Pickett's charge. The *Killer Angels* portray Lee as bull headed, stubborn, betting on one last desperate throw of the dice in a disastrous charge at all costs. It shows Longstreet as being the prescient general seeing disaster at Gettysburg before it came and strongly disagreeing with Lee while every loyal to his orders! Hmmmmm.....I think I can make an argument that Longstreet may have been insubordinate at Gettysburg. I believe a rational examination of the facts and events of the battle show that Lee, Early, Ewell, Longstreet and Stuart ALL share some of the blame. Also, let's not forget that the Army of the Potomac fought magnificently at Gettysburg, so we can make the claim that rather than blaming any one Southern general for the defeat, perhaps we should look at what the Army of the Potomac did right as an explanation for its success at Gettysburg. However, Shaara shows Longstreet as the only general North or South who understood implications of a defensive fight. Nolan in *Lee Considered* states that if Lee's overall strategy had been defensive the South may not have lost the war, or at least the conception of the cause being lost from the first might not have been true. Here, it is interesting to note that Joe Johnston's brilliant defensive strategy in the West yielded less positive results than Lee's offensive one in the east. Speaking of the implications of defensive warfare, historically and militarily, I don't believe they were fully understood until the great and gory battles of the Somme, Verdun, and others fought in the 20th Century. No Civil War general grasped the folly of sending mass assault waves against entrenched troops with rifled guns and artillery. The technology that made the Civil War so

costly and destructive to human life was not then fully understood. Lee's ordering of Pickett's charge was just one example of this. Two other similar examples that spring to mind are the Federal assault of Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg and Grant's assault on Lee's fortifications at Cold Harbor. Indeed, the entire summer of 1864 was an amalgam of such costly assaults.

Enter onto the scene a new look at the battle of Gettysburg. Currently there are several books out purporting to explain what Lee's real plan was at Gettysburg and why it failed. But Tom Carhart makes the most compelling case that Lee's real plan at Gettysburg did not rest solely on a last grand and desperate charge but on a well formulated strategic plan that was not successful due to the tactical failures of his generals. Years past the prevailing thought was that Lee had been failed by his generals at Gettysburg. Currently the fashionable thinking tends to gravitate to explanations of Lee experiencing several bad days, perhaps being ill, being compelled to fight a battle that simply happened when the armies crashed into each other, despite General Lee's orders not to bring on a general engagement, and then fighting it piecemeal as separate uncoordinated tactical battles. Also current thought gravitates to the belief that General Lee was simply not the great general that everyone idolized him to be and that he was suffering from "Chancellorsville syndrome" and the belief that his army was invincible and that this made him overestimate the Army of Northern Virginia's ability and capability.

Carhart makes a compelling case that Lee had planned a large scale three pronged and brilliant strategic attack that would ensure that his army was as successful the on the third day as it had been on July 1 and 2. The third day's three pronged strategic and simultaneous assault would ensure the destruction of the Army of the Potomac and southern triumph. The singular disaster of Pickett's unsupported charge was not to happen the way that it ultimately played out. Carhart makes the argument that Lee had focused his considerable and brilliant strategic efforts on a simultaneous operation where Pickett would hit the Union Center, Ewell would attack Culp's Hill and turn the Union flank and Jeb Stuart, incommunicado until the end of the 2nd day with detrimental effect for his commander, would on the third day

execute the coup d'grace with a attack on the Union rear in concert with Pickett and Ewell.

Because Lee never discussed the war after Appomattox and he wrote about it only twice to protect the reputation of subordinates, not ever acknowledging slanders to his reputation or praise for his actions, and never completing or publishing he memoirs there are no documents to refer to. Much of the written evidence must come from the OR or memoirs written by participants many years later. Lee typically, like most great generals, was notoriously secretive and never confided his strategic plans in their entirety to subordinates (especially after the disaster of Lost Order 191 which would have cost him everything at Antietam with a more aggressive general than McClellan). Carhart cannot supply documented proof for his claims. However, Carhart bases his claims on a solid knowledge of Lee's life, his education, previous military experience, and the world Lee inhabited. Lee was not stupid. His pit bull gambles were calculated and creative and necessary to ensure success in a war where he was outnumbered, out gunned, out supplied and where he understood that in a war of attrition he would most certainly lose. Carhart makes a solid case for the fact that Lee would never been so careless as to strategically rest all on a singular, unsupported attack no matter how grand and magnificent. Lee was a daring gambler and aggressive risk taker, however, he would not have rested all on an unsupported Pickett's Charge. As recently as yesterday when we went to Hamden CWRT to hear Tom Fleming speak about Lee, he related an incident about one of the historians from Carlisle Military Barracks. This man was a Texan and career army officer, who stood with Tom Fleming as he research his latest book on Lee, and put into words what many of us have perhaps though as we stood looking across the Emmitsburg Road at imagining 12,000 Confederate soldiers preparing to attack the center of the Union line. "Tom, I was brought up to believe that Robert E. Lee was the greatest man in the world. When I came to Gettysburg and looked at that, I knew it wasn't so. What was he thinking? How could he order an attack like that? Carhart tries to answer that question and the answer is that Pickett's Charge was not what Robert E. Lee planned at all. Indeed, when studies of the battle are made, one area almost always neglected are the events on East Calvary Battlefield. Little visited, little remembered,

often not studied as part of the greater battle, there is no doubt that Jeb Stuart's role, as strategically defined by Lee, was to take the Union from the rear on the third day simultaneously with Pickett's grand frontal assault. If even a few companies of cavalry had broken loose in the Union rear during a major frontal assault it would have created havoc, panic, and most probably broken the line. This manoeuvre *sur les derrieres* was a crucial part of Lee's greater strategy and it was grounded in his life, his education and his military experience. Carhart states a case where in order to understand the battle of Gettysburg and what Lee was truly thinking, Carhart challenges readers to study the battle in a more holistic fashion, strategically and geographically. Alas, for General Lee the strategic coordination of the efforts of the Army of Northern Virginia during the Battle of Gettysburg resembled more closely the green command structure and errors exhibited during the Seven Days rather than the synchronized and victorious movements of the Chancellorsville campaign. Lee's strategy at Gettysburg was tactically fractured in its execution by his generals and resulted in failure.

Carhart also takes a revisionist look at another once vaunted and recently much maligned personality who figures prominently in the foiling of Lee's great strategic plan and ensured that his manoeuvre *sur les derrieres* was a failure. George Armstrong Custer's reputation in U.S. History is one of mythological and polarized proportions that never lends itself to rational evaluation. In Carhart's book, Custer emerges as the hero that stops Stuart's rear assault against long odds. Custer's Civil War career marks him as one of the greatest Cavalry commanders in world history. This fact is most often obscured and his name is forever linked with the appalling defeat and massacre of his men on a windswept Montana hillside. Custer had a genius for war and a situational awareness in combat that made him almost unstoppable. Once a tragic hero, the current fashion views him as a horrendous, incompetent, publicity loving villain. However, at Gettysburg it was Custer, the boy general elevated from Captain to Brigadier general on June 28, 1863 only days before, who would lead his outnumbered brigade—the 1st 5th 6th, and 7th Michigan Cavalry—his Wolverines--against Stuart's bold attack in the battle's final hours on East Cavalry Battle Field. On the Rummel Farm on East Cavalry Battlefield Custer

would stop Stuart in his tracks with a force only half of his size and help turn the tide of the war forever against the South. Ironically, Stuart would be killed a year later at Yellow Tavern by a bullet fired by one of Custer's men. Carhart does not mention this, but perhaps when we study the battle in a more holistic manner, this farm and not the famous clump of trees, may be the real high water mark from which the Confederacy's hopes would disintegrate into the horrible war of attrition of the Overland Campaign and ultimately conclude at Appomattox.