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Robert E. Lee's Dilemma: Pickett's Charge

Within the Battle of Gettysburg, no singular event was more critical in determining the battle's outcome than Pickett's Charge.[1] It was the turning point of the American Civil War, the point at which victory slipped from Robert E. Lee and the Confederate cause to Abraham Lincoln's quest to preserve the Union. While the importance of Pickett's Charge is not in doubt, many doubt Lee's decision to order it, and it is natural to second-guess him. After all, closely fought battles are controversial because—by their nature—they could have gone the other way. Lee won before and would win other battles after July 3, 1863 and had reason to believe in the assault's success. However, in order to successfully bring war to its conclusion, one cannot rely entirely on tactical success but must also focus on strategic goals. From the Confederate perspective, it would have been better if Lee never ordered Pickett's Charge.

Having won four previous large battles and one draw[2] against the Union, Lee hoped to fight and win a decisive battle on Northern soil believing such a victory would compel President Lincoln to end the conflict and recognize Southern independence. Given what we now know about Lincoln's resolve to preserve the Union, Lee's strategy to maintain Southern independence through a single victorious campaign on Northern soil appears problematic. However, Lee couldn't have known that at the time and given his recent successes, he and the Army of Northern Virginia were never in a stronger position to bring the war north. Furthermore, another decisive victory[3] might just be enough to earn the South foreign recognition—and possibly alliances—it coveted. The timing of Gettysburg was critical in another way: New York City draft riots in June 1863 showed just how unpopular the war was with many in the North. Adding to Lee's sense of urgency was the ongoing siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, which was threatening to divide the Confederacy. If Vicksburg fell, an army that was already struggling to supply itself would no longer have access to Texas cattle or supplies from other western Confederate states. If the war was being lost in the west, it just might be saved in the east.

Since the last week of June 1863, Lee had lost contact with his cavalry[4] and by extension, he had lost the eyes and ears of his army. In effect, he was marching blindly through enemy territory. On June 30, Lee gave orders for his scattered troops to concentrate around the nearest town where the road networks converged—Gettysburg. On July 1, Confederate forces led by Henry Heth found themselves surprised by Union dismounted cavalry fighting a defensive action before the arrival of supporting infantry. Lee had previously ordered his officers to avoid offensive engagement until the Army of Northern Virginia had reassembled. However, when word reached Lee that Heth's troops were fighting Union soldiers—who were for the moment outnumbered—he ordered all of his commanders to attack and pushed Union soldiers completely out of Gettysburg. This success was tempered by the fact that Confederate soldiers under the command of Richard Ewell failed to capture Culp's Hill.[5] On July 2, Confederate attacks continued, focusing on Culp's Hill as well as the Union left.[6] In both places, the Confederates nearly broke through federal lines.

Lee had launched powerful attacks on both Union flanks which had barely failed and was now faced with a dilemma: Northern reinforcements kept arriving and consequently, the Army of the Potomac grew stronger by the hour. Lee had four options: attack Union forces where they were, retreat, disengage,[7] or hold his ground and fight a defensive engagement. The last option was undesirable because his army was not in possession of advantageous terrain, the number of Union soldiers was increasing, and they were better supplied; therefore, the North was in a better position to win this type of engagement. Retreat was also not a good option because Lee's army had fought hard for two days, nearly winning on both. To retreat now would be detrimental to Confederate morale and would also be a temporary strategic blow to Lee's campaign. Disengaging and fighting elsewhere was not a good choice for the same reasons as retreat and Lee was not sure his men could reposition before federal troops blocked them. He reasoned that since the Union's flanks were strong, the center must be comparatively weak. Launching a Napoleonic-style infantry assault up the middle and supported by artillery and cavalry was, in Lee's mind, the best way to achieve victory.

In retrospect, the assault seems hopeless. Opposing the 12,500 Confederate soldiers were 7,000 Union soldiers at the center of the line where Pickett's men were to converge with one Union infantry corps (roughly 11,000 men) being held in reserve, as well as 150 Union artillery pieces firing at the advancing rebels as soon as they emerged from their assembly areas.

Battles by their nature are risky—since to do battle involves harming others and exposing one's person to harm—but commanders are forced to take risks. Lee knew the assault would be precarious but he designed an attack that would counter risks. The Confederate artillery would bombard and break up the Union center immediately preceding the attack. The majority of the Confederate guns were supposed to then move to the infantry flanks. Additionally, Lee ordered Jeb Stuart[8] to take his 5,000 cavalymen behind Union lines, cause havoc, and divert men from the center just as Pickett's Charge was unfolding. Little known, is that in addition to the 12,500 attacking troops, Lee arranged for a reserve force of seven brigades—nearly 12,000 men—to follow the initial assault and exploit the breakthrough. This was not a simple frontal assault, but rather a sophisticated attack that utilized elements across the spectrum of available combined arms.

However well thought out Pickett's Charge was, it suffered critical shortcomings that prevented it from being carried out in the manner Lee intended. Confederate artillery was not nearly as effective as planned owing to the fact that it did not have the requisite ammunition for a long bombardment; which Lee should have known. Stuart's cavalry never reached the Union rear because they were intercepted by Union cavalry led by George Armstrong Custer. More fatally, is that the man designated by Lee to coordinate Pickett's Charge, James Longstreet, did not carry out his orders properly because he did not believe the assault would be successful.[9] As a result, when several hundred Confederate soldiers finally reached the Union center, there were no reinforcements behind them. Believing them necessary for defense after the assault's presumed failure,[10] Longstreet ordered his reserve brigades to not engage, thereby failing to exploit any success the first waves might have and in effect, dooming the assault almost before it began.

A common military maxim is that ‘the first casualty of any battle is the plan.’ Regarding Pickett’s Charge, it is common for armchair generals to chastise Lee for disregarding tactical realities in putting too much faith in his men who were given a task which was too formidable. Certainly the task was daunting, but it was one that *could have* been completed successfully had Robert E. Lee’s complicated plan been executed as intended.[11] However, the success of Pickett’s Charge was stillborn because Lee failed to remove a commander who had shown his reluctance to coordinate it numerous times. Yet, even had the assault succeeded as planned, victory at Gettysburg would have been a pyrric one; a victory in which Lee would have had to absorb a great number of casualties, only to face the Northern juggernaut again or more probably have had to evacuate the North eventually due to a lack of supplies. None of this is to take anything away from Union soldiers who, after all, won the battle. Years later, George Pickett was reportedly asked why the South lost at Gettysburg to which he replied “I’ve always thought the Yankees had something to do with it.”

[1] The battle’s final assault led by its namesake, George Pickett.

[2] Seven Days, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville and Antietam.

[3] So close to the federal capital and so soon after Lee’s tactical masterpiece at Chancellorsville.

[4] Due to an overly liberal interpretation of Lee’s orders by Jeb Stuart who commanded the Southern cavalry.

[5] Which would later be occupied by the Union on the night of July 1-2 and form the upper right bulwark of the federal defense—the end of the so-called ‘fishhook.’

[6] Where the famous battles for Little Round Top were being waged.

[7] Lee’s second-in-command, James Longstreet argued repeatedly the need to disengage from their current lines and move on the Union right flank, in between the Army of the Potomac and Washington in which Union soldiers would be forced to attack Confederate ones on ground of their choosing.

[8] Who finally arrived with his cavalymen on the evening of July 2.

[9] Arguing that Pickett’s Charge would be a replay in reverse of the final moments of the Battle of Fredericksburg.

[10] Although the first waves were successful enough to route the 71st Pennsylvania Regiment.

[11] His plan also required Union ‘help’ such as that given by the 71st Pennsylvania Regiment in order to succeed.