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# A Lesson in Battle Tempo: The Union Pursuit After Gettysburg

WILLIAM TERPELUK

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The concept of battle tempo is an ephemeral one in the conduct of offensive military operations. Difficult to gain but easily lost, the ability to maintain momentum throughout a battle or campaign often has been the difference between victory and defeat. The battlefield commander who is both decisive *and intuitive* will seize opportunities to gain or regain the initiative and ultimately will defeat his opponent. While many military operations in history underscore the importance of battle tempo, perhaps none is so poignant as the Union pursuit of the Confederate army after the Battle of Gettysburg.

During the battle itself on the first three days of July 1863, the Union Army of the Potomac under Major General George G. Meade fought on the operational defensive. The Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee had been in the midst of its campaign through Pennsylvania when it engaged the Union army during that pivotal battle. Meade, in command of his army for less than a week, decisively countered the moves of his seasoned opponent. Lee's army was defeated, and Meade's thoughts turned to his next move.

Besides the friction normally associated with sustained combat operations, other factors were to influence the actions of both sides subsequent to Gettysburg. From the perspective of the Confederate commander, heavy rains would force a stand with his back against a very formidable river. From the perspective of the Union commander, Meade would not only be hampered by mountainous terrain and the same rainy weather, he would also be strongly influenced by political considerations. Given the importance of Washington, D.C., and its proximity to hostile territory, the protection of the capital had been a prime consideration in military planning since the start of the Civil War.

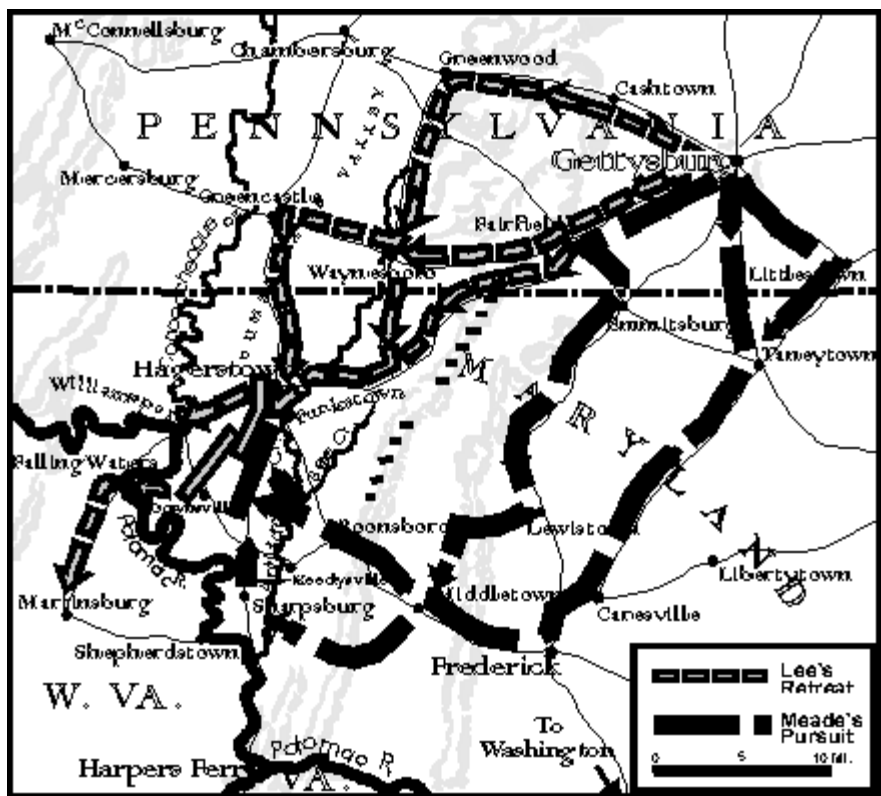
## Meade Shifts to the Offense

As decisive as the results of the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg were, the Confederate army remained an effective fighting force. General Meade was acutely aware of this and carefully planned future operations for the Army of the Potomac with that in mind. He could not have known it then, but his newly won luster was about to fade in the eyes of President Abraham Lincoln and General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck. With their expectation of a complete defeat of Lee, Meade was hard-pressed to deliver the *coup de grace* that his superiors considered to be just within his grasp.

After the defeat of Pickett's Charge, the disastrous Confederate attack that marked the end of the Gettysburg battle, Meade's thoughts immediately turned to the offense. As he told the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War on 5 March 1864:

As soon as the assault was repulsed, I went immediately to the extreme left of my line, with the determination of advancing the left and making an assault upon the enemy's lines. . . . The great length of the line, and the time required to carry these orders out to the front, and the movement subsequently made, before the report given to me of the condition of the forces in the front and left, caused it to be so late in the evening as to induce me to abandon the assault which I had contemplated.[1]

Although the unscathed Union VI Corps was available as a counterattack force against Lee's right flank, it represented Meade's only usable reserve. Considering that fact, as well as the overall condition of the Union army, he subsequently decided in favor of a larger maneuver through Middletown, Maryland, across South Mountain, and to Williamsport, Maryland, along the Potomac River. As shown on Map 1 below, Meade's intent was to intercept Lee along his anticipated line of retreat back into Virginia.



Map 1. Area of Operations

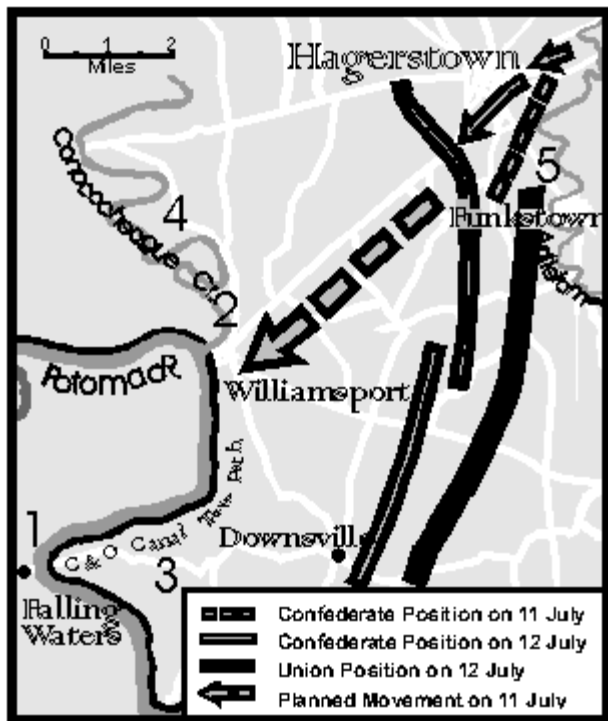
This represented Meade's only sensible option for the pursuit of Lee. A main attack to the immediate front through South Mountain at Fairfield Gap would have been as time-consuming as it would have been foolish. Based upon the original instructions Meade had received from Halleck on 27 June to stay between the Confederate army and Washington,[2] a movement to his right, possibly through Cashtown Pass and then south through the Cumberland Valley, also would have to be quickly dismissed. Such a maneuver, worthy of a Stonewall Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, or Lee himself, would have entailed a large degree of risk and would have required almost complete surprise if it were to *destroy* (as opposed to *defeat*) the Army of Northern Virginia. When this constraint pertaining to the protection of Washington was removed a year later, the maneuver possibilities for the Union army increased. It was U. S. Grant, not Meade, who would benefit from subsequent opportunities to take advantage of the operational potential of those possibilities.

Meade's planned movement could not begin without confirmation that Lee was indeed in retreat. Using VI Corps to maintain pressure on the Confederate force around the Fairfield Gap, Meade verified the general retreat of the Army of Northern Virginia on 5 July.[3] When satisfied that the Confederate rear guard in Fairfield Gap posed no threat, Meade issued orders on 6 July to set the Army of the Potomac in motion. With Cashtown Pass northwest of Gettysburg covered by a Union cavalry force, Meade's own right flank was secured. He could safely carry out his intended plan.[4]

Two days' movement may have been lost by Meade's decision to verify that Lee had indeed retreated south, but a careful analysis reveals the sound rationale for his prudence. He was preparing to pursue an enemy army that he believed at the time still to be superior in strength to that of his own.[5] He displayed no appreciable trepidation about going on the offense under these conditions, but he was determined not to give up the hard-won gains of the Battle of Gettysburg. Had Meade prematurely commenced his overall flanking movement with Lee still remaining in strength in the vicinity of Gettysburg, that position could yet have fallen to the Confederates. Not only would this have been a tremendous military setback to the Union, the psychological and political consequences would have been unfathomable. Considering that Meade would need his entire army for decisive action once he reestablished contact with Lee, dividing his force to both protect his rear and continue his flanking maneuver would not have been practical in any military sense.

## The Pursuit Begins in Earnest

Meade's route of march may seem somewhat circuitous, but the nature of the north-south Catoctin and South Mountain ranges between him and Lee gave him little real choice. With the route through Fairfield Gap too easily defended, the next series of passes through South Mountain are found directly west of Frederick, Maryland, about 35 miles south of Gettysburg. Although opposed by the rebel cavalry under a rejuvenated J.E.B. Stuart, the main force of the Union cavalry quickly secured the South Mountain passes and screened the movement of the Army of the Potomac. While Meade correctly anticipated the river crossings at Falling Waters (site #1 on Map 2) and Williamsport (#2) as potential locations for his next confrontation with the enemy main body, this still did not mitigate Lee's two biggest inherent advantages, favorable positioning and terrain.



Map 2. Situation 12 July 1863.

In the truest Jominian sense, Lee was operating on interior lines throughout the retreat from Gettysburg. He followed the most direct and obvious route to the Williamsport area and made it virtually impossible, even under the most fortuitous of circumstances, for Meade to "steal a march" on the Confederate army. Further, the topography in the Williamsport-Falling Waters area made it a natural defensive position should Lee need to turn and face the Union army.

The Falling Waters site is protected on three sides by a series of right-angle turns along the Potomac River; a north-south ridge line dominates the one exposed side of a defensive box (#3 on the map). Williamsport itself is protected from the north and west by the Conococheague Creek (#4). Once safely across the Potomac, the Confederates would be relatively secure from a Union attempt to outflank them, since such a maneuver would require Meade to force a crossing of the river. Consequently both commanders sought the advantage--Meade to deny Lee the opportunity to improve his position, Lee to engage the Union army on his own terms.

The pursuit by the Union army was severely hampered by the same rain that made the Potomac River unfordable for the Army of Northern Virginia.[6] The difficulty of the Confederate situation was compounded by a cavalry raid conducted by a Union force from Harpers Ferry which destroyed a pontoon bridge at Falling Waters.[7] On balance, this turn of events provided Meade with the chance to decisively close with the enemy force, but it also gave Lee a chance to more fully prepare his defensive line. As early as 8 July, Halleck began exhorting Meade to move more rapidly and to attack Lee when the Confederate army would become divided during its crossing of the Potomac River.

Halleck did, however, urge some caution if the bulk of Lee's army had to be engaged north of the river.[8]

By 9 July, Meade began the movement to the west of South Mountain, which he described as being "on a line from Boonsboro towards the centre of the line from Hagerstown to Williamsport, my left flank looking to the river, and my right towards the mountains." [9] Although he had surmised Lee's next objective, Meade was still unsure of his opponent's exact whereabouts and could not exclude the possibility of being attacked by the Confederate army. As he conveyed to Halleck, "It is with the greatest difficulty that I can obtain any reliable intelligence of the enemy." [10]

By 10 July, however, Meade had received preliminary locations on the enemy line which ran "from the Potomac, near Falling Waters, through Downsville to Funkstown and to the northeast of Hagerstown." [11] Meade informed Halleck that he wanted to further develop the situation before committing to a particular course of action. Halleck, for his part, reiterated his earlier advice that Meade should not attack until all available friendly forces could be concentrated. [12]

The Army of the Potomac had concentrated by 10 July in a defensive posture along the Antietam and Beaver creeks. It was reinforced that day with four brigades from the Harpers Ferry command of Major General William H. French. A cavalry force of two divisions had already secured the Funkstown area (#5 on Map 2), four miles northwest of the main army. [13]

### **Meade Ponders His Options**

The Union battle line stretched a dozen miles. During the movement-to-contact, Meade indeed made the proper disposition with his forces to maintain tactical flexibility. He informed Halleck on 9 July that he intended to "keep as concentrated as the roads by which I can move will admit, so that should the enemy attack, I can mass to meet him, and if he assumes the defensive, I can deploy as I think proper." [14] Meade was rapidly approaching his most critical decision in this phase of the Gettysburg Campaign, where both the nature and timing of his future operations had to be carefully weighed.

As focused as Meade may have been on the crossing sites at Williamsport and Falling Waters, he was unable to move his center toward those objectives on a narrow front without courting complete disaster on his flanks. With the existing disposition of Lee's army, any Union maneuver directly along the Potomac to cut Lee off would have dangerously exposed Meade's right flank and rear. Indeed, any Union success in this regard might not even have been a setback to Lee if he used the opportunity to pin the Union army against the Potomac long enough to launch another invasion of the North through the Cumberland Valley. Meade then would have been in the embarrassing position of trying to catch the Confederate force. An attempt by the Union army during this period to defeat Lee by moving to the south side of the Potomac River could have had similar consequences, and in the process uncovered Washington.

For a massive Union assault to succeed, two principal planning factors had to be considered. First, from a psychological standpoint, Meade needed to realize that Lee considered him to be cautious. A plan of operation for the Army of the Potomac that could defeat Lee would have to appear to be out of character for the Union general.

To counter that expectation, Meade had to take some advantage of the limited flexibility that Halleck gave him concerning responsibility for the protection of Washington. While this requirement was stated fairly explicitly in his original instructions, Halleck did allow Meade to deviate from the directive "as far as circumstances will admit." [15] Lee no doubt considered an assault on his right, near Downsville, as the most likely Union course of action. This was true if for no other reasons than it was the most conservative approach and also would keep the Union army directly between his army and Washington.

The second planning factor related to the nature of the terrain in the area of operations. While the sharp bends in the Potomac River in the Williamsport-Falling Waters area were inherently advantageous to the defender, they also could be turned against the Confederates. If a sizable Union force could penetrate Lee's lines and secure the high ground directly between the fording site at Williamsport and the pontoon bridge at Falling Waters, it could in effect split the Army of Northern Virginia on the north side of the river. Further, the terrain south of Hagerstown, on Lee's left, would offer advantages to a Union force attacking west from the Funkstown area toward Williamsport. Devoid of natural obstacles such as ridge lines and creeks, this avenue of approach would permit an assault on the portion of Lee's line that could be reinforced least effectively. When considering that the Confederate defensive line had a length

approaching eight miles, this was a significant planning factor for the Union general.[16]

### **The Window of Opportunity Opens -- and Closes**

Meade's only chance for a decisive engagement with the Army of Northern Virginia was tenuous at best. As the Confederate army was essentially conducting a phased withdrawal, it would no longer pose an offensive threat to Meade when its left flank had been pulled back to the area around Williamsport. Therefore, Meade's "window of opportunity" would be *after* the Confederate left flank had been withdrawn but *before* an extensive line of entrenchments could be established to protect Lee's troops as they forded the river at Williamsport. The Downsville position confronting the Union left had been the most static during this period and would be the most prepared. As events would soon prove, Meade's best chance would entail a concentrated assault on his right, along the Funkstown-Williamsport axis, as the retrograde movement of the Confederate left was actually being conducted.

Meade was well aware of his opponents' predicament with the rain-swollen Potomac River; nevertheless, he showed signs of being unduly awed by Lee's capacity for offensive action despite indications that the "Gray Fox" had become much more defensive-minded. As Meade described in his 10 July letter to his wife, Lee "has been compelled to make a stand, and will of course make a desperate one." [17] Meade, still moving deliberately, continually emphasized caution in his dispatches to Halleck. [18]

Meade eventually would decide on the Funkstown-Williamsport approach for his main attack, but undue caution may have gotten the best of him at this point. After concentrating the army on 10 July, he chose to maintain the bulk of his force in those positions for an additional day as the Union cavalry continued its aggressive screening to the northwest. [19] As he stated to Halleck late on 11 July, "Upon advancing my right flank across the Antietam this morning, the enemy abandoned Funkstown and Hagerstown." [20] "The enemy" in this case was the Confederate II Corps under General Richard S. Ewell. The brief window of opportunity quickly closed, as Ewell reported that his corps soon "began fortifying, and, in a short time my men were well protected. Their spirit was never better than at this time, and the wish was universal that the enemy should attack." [21]

Meade set his I, VI, and XI Corps in motion to Funkstown on 12 July, but was almost certainly aware that time was now working very much against him. Despite his belief in the superior numbers of the Confederate army, he could not help but conclude that his chance for decisive victory under such circumstances would require massing an overwhelming force against the weakest point in Lee's overextended line at the proper time. In a 12 July message to Halleck, Meade committed to an attack the next day "unless something intervenes to prevent it." [22]

In an action for which he would be criticized later, Meade convened a Council of War on the evening of 12 July. A consensus of his generals urged a delay for a "more careful examination of the enemy's position, strength, and defensive works." [23] Based on the improved status of the Confederate defenses by then, this was undoubtedly the correct decision. Meade personally made a reconnaissance in the rain on 13 July. [24] When the attack finally went forward yet another day later, on 14 July, it was done as a general movement to "feel [Lee's] position and seek for a weak point." [25] Unfortunately for the Union commander, the main body of Lee's army already had crossed the river during the previous night. [26]

Meade suspected that he would be severely chastised as a result of his delay, and, indeed, the most biting criticism was delivered by his superiors. Through Halleck, Lincoln expressed "his dissatisfaction" with Meade's inability to decisively engage Lee before his escape back to Virginia. [27] Adding insult to injury in Meade's eyes, Halleck mentioned that these comments were intended to serve as "a stimulus to an active pursuit" of Lee. [28] Meade deeply resented the implication that he would have to be motivated by his Commander in Chief before he would begin an energetic pursuit of the Confederate army. [29]

### **"What If . . . ?" -- The Plan That Might Have Succeeded**

Could Meade have attacked successfully without risking catastrophic loss to his army? With our knowledge of Meade's concept for the upcoming battle, a plausible scenario for Union success can be envisioned if the Army of the Potomac had moved to its right a day earlier, as opposed to the actual movement on 12 July.

Had Meade initiated his next planned movement on 11 July instead of choosing to stay in position, he would have been able to take full advantage of Ewell's withdrawal from the Funkstown area. A Union movement at that time would *not* have been premature and would have entailed entirely *acceptable risk* based on Meade's knowledge of enemy positions and intentions. Should Lee sortie from his prepared positions near Downsville, a weakened Union left or center could still effectively use the series of north-south ridges and creeks to defend or delay. With a river to restrict Lee's movement to his right and the Union-held South Mountain to his eventual front, the Confederate commander would put his army at great risk with very little chance to gain by such a maneuver.

In this scenario, the operation would begin by occupying attack positions in the Funkstown area on the morning of 11 July. The main attack, ideally reinforced with a fourth corps, would begin on 11 July or, at the latest, the morning of 12 July. An additional corps would be held in reserve. A division-sized cavalry force would simultaneously conduct a demonstration or probing attack on the south bank of the Potomac. The cavalry raid would be similar to that which was actually launched from Harpers Ferry on 14 July by Brigadier General David McM. Gregg's division,[30] but with the intent to distract and confuse Lee.

A feint against the Downsville position would be made with two corps on 11 July to serve as a further deception. These corps would eventually assume a local defense on the Union left and center with the northernmost corps poised to support the main effort. This feint and the cavalry demonstration would be intended to instill a belief in Lee that the Union main attack was actually being made on his right flank. The bulk of the Union cavalry would be placed in the defensible terrain on Meade's extreme right (south and southwest of Hagerstown) to protect against the inevitable counterattack from J.E.B. Stuart.[31]

After rapid concentration of the attacking force, the main Union attack from Funkstown would have to be pursued vigorously. Should the Union attack lose momentum, Confederate forces could rapidly shift along the interior lines in a manner similar to that at the Battle of Antietam. Nevertheless, a Union attack that would capture Williamsport and its fording site would force Confederates into the Downsville salient and allow the possibility of further Union operations across the Potomac River.

In all likelihood, of course, other factors might have prevented the success of this hypothetical scenario. It would have required an almost impeccable sense of timing and coordination. Meade had lost two of his most dependable senior leaders at Gettysburg. Further, the collective expertise of the Confederate leadership was just too great to permit itself to be caught in such a trap. This combination of factors, which justified to some degree Meade's caution, was not sufficiently appreciated by Lincoln. Despite Meade's cautious nature, the chances of destroying the Army of Northern Virginia as it retreated across the Potomac after Gettysburg would have been relatively low even under the best of circumstances.

## **Aftermath**

Meade was victorious at the Battle of Gettysburg, but his performance during the pursuit of Lee began to cast doubt on his abilities. As part of his message traffic on 14 July, he went so far as to tender his resignation, an action that was quickly rejected in a dispatch from Halleck.[32] Nevertheless, Meade's star was on the decline.



**General George G. Meade**

As noble as Meade's intentions may have been, he had done considerable harm to himself by the tentativeness expressed in the tone of his dispatches. The fact that he had consulted with his generals brought a rebuke from Halleck: "It is proverbial that councils of war never fight." [33] The disclaimer in Meade's message of his intent to attack on 13 July, "unless something intervenes to prevent it," can almost be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Further, the attack on 14 July took on more the form of a reconnaissance-in-force than an assault designed to dislodge a determined enemy. [34]

Halleck later attempted to mollify the Commanding General of the Army of the Potomac. He wrote to Meade on 28 July:

You should not have been surprised or vexed at the President's disappointment at the escape of Lee's Army. He had examined into all the details of sending you reinforcements, to satisfy himself that every man who could possibly be spared from other places had been sent to your army. He thought that Lee's defeat was so certain that he felt no little impatience at his unexpected escape. [35]

This statement conveys a great deal about civil-military relations during this period of the American Civil War and also provides insight into Lincoln's style of managing the war effort. Meade still felt compelled to justify his actions and seemingly questioned the President's helpfulness in a message to Halleck on 30 July:

I have been acting under the belief, from your telegrams, that it was [Lincoln's] and your wish that I should pursue Lee and bring him to a general engagement, if practicable. The President, however, labors under two misapprehensions: First, I did not fail to attack Lee at Williamsport because I could not do so safely: I simply delayed the attack until, by examination of his position, I could do so with some reasonable degree of probability that the attack would be successful. He withdrew before that information could be obtained. Secondly, my army at this moment is about equal in strength to what it was at Williamsport, . . . being about equal to the discharge of the nine months' men. By nine months' men, I mean those that were with the army at Gettysburg and before, and do not refer to several regiments that reported at Hagerstown, but from their disorganization were never brought to the front. [36]

Meade's style of competent but low-key aggressiveness did not seem to appeal to a President who needed quick and complete victories. To Meade, his own reputation meant far less than his sense of duty. He also considered himself completely above politics and self-aggrandizement, [37] running the ultimate risk of being overshadowed by a different breed of general by the end of the Civil War.

The results of the Gettysburg Campaign, both military and political, have been debated for the past 130 years. Somewhat more problematic, however, is the change in the strategic balance that might have arisen had Meade been



able to inflict more damage upon the Confederate army. Shortly after the Gettysburg Campaign, the Confederate I Corps under Lieutenant General James Longstreet was sent to reinforce the Confederate Army of Tennessee. While Longstreet's Corps would play a key role in the Southern victory at Chickamauga Creek in September 1863, the overall failure of the Confederate effort in the Chattanooga Campaign negated the strategic advantage of the reinforcement from the Virginia theater.

When Meade next confronted Lee, the Confederate army would indeed be smaller, but the Army of the Potomac also would be hampered by the detachment of Meade's XI and XII Corps to Chattanooga as well as troops to quell the draft riots in the North.[38] In a strategic sense, had the Army of the Potomac sustained large casualties during an attack on 13 July, the inability to divert these two corps to the Chattanooga Campaign would have altered the balance of forces in the West. Raising the possibility of an eventual Union defeat in that theater, this could have drastically altered the course of the Civil War.

Finally, General George Meade should be judged on what he was able to accomplish while in command of an army for such a short period of time. Even if his intuitive skills largely failed him at the most critical point in the pursuit after Gettysburg, he had certainly proven his prowess at the operational level of war. As described later by the Artillery Chief of the Army of the Potomac, General Henry J. Hunt:

[Meade] was . . . right in pushing up to Gettysburg after the battle commenced, right in remaining there, right in making his battle a purely defensive one, right therefore in taking the line he did, right in not attempting a counter-attack at any stage of the battle, right as to his pursuit of Lee. Rarely has more skill, vigor, or wisdom been shown in any such circumstances.[39]

When put in the context of the entire Gettysburg Campaign, Meade's inability to fully maintain the momentum of his pursuit can be understood, if not forgiven. After all, his adversary, Robert E. Lee, already had proven himself to be the master of initiative under desperate conditions. Lee's own battle tempo had been lost only by an act of nature, the flooding of the Potomac River. Still, the pursuit of Lee demonstrates the importance of the subtleties in battle command where one delay in movement can have an irreversible effect. As far as Meade's generalship is concerned, it can be objectively determined only after reviewing his performance in subsequent campaigns and battles. While Gettysburg began the legacy of George Meade, his real fame would be gained or lost along Mine Run, in the Wilderness, and around Petersburg.

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Reviewed 10 November 1997. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil).