

Gettysburg: The South's last best hope

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

BACKGROUND AND FACTS

- ★ **Location:** South-central Pennsylvania, near the town of Gettysburg.
- ★ **Date:** July 1–3, 1863
- ★ **Outcome:** Union victory
- ★ **Casualties:** Over 51,000 (23,000 Union, 28,000 Confederate).
- ★ **Significance:** Lee's invasion of the North was stopped. The Confederacy would never again launch an offensive on Northern territory.

THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

A TURNING POINT IN THE CIVIL WAR

"We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."
—Abraham Lincoln

★ JULY 1–3, 1863 ★

LEE'S INVASION OF THE NORTH

LEE (Confederate)
MEADE (Union)

WHY GETTYSBURG MATTERED

- ★ Lee's invasion ended in failure.
- ★ The Confederacy could not replace its immense losses.
- ★ The Union gained the initiative for the rest of the war.
- ★ It paved the way for Grant's Overland Campaign and the final defeat of the Confederacy.

BY THE NUMBERS

UNION	CONFEDERATE
23,000+	28,000+

Total casualties:
Over 51,000 in three days of fighting.

THE THREE DAYS

JULY 1 – THE OPENING

Confederate forces push Union troops into Gettysburg. Fierce fighting through the town and surrounding areas. The Union line holds.

JULY 2 – THE STRUGGLE

Lee renews the attack with great fury. Fighting rages all day at Little Round Top, Devil's Den, and along the Union center.

JULY 3 – PICKETT'S CHARGE

Lee orders a massive assault on the Union center. Pickett's Charge is repulsed with terrible losses. The Confederate army retreats.

EFFECTS ON THE NORTH

- ★ A great moral boost.
- ★ Strengthened confidence in Lincoln's leadership.
- ★ The dedication of the National Cemetery and Lincoln's Address gave the war a higher purpose.

"...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom..."
—The Gettysburg Address
November 19, 1863

KEY GROUND – KEY TO VICTORY

THE COMMANDER WHO WON

General George G. Meade took command of the Army of the Potomac on the eve of battle. His calm leadership and strong defensive position turned the tide and secured victory.

GEORGE G. MEADE
General, Union Army of the Potomac

EFFECTS ON THE SOUTH

- ★ Lee's army suffered irreplaceable losses.
- ★ The dream of European recognition faded.
- ★ The Confederacy remained on the defensive for the rest of the war.

Gettysburg was the high water mark of the Confederacy.
From this point forward, the Union moved toward victory.

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was the site of Robert E. Lee's last incursion into northern territory and the South's best and last chance for a negotiated peace with the Federal Government.

Lee's aim was to both threaten Washington, D.C. and possibly even the capture of Philadelphia. Either prospect would have most likely resulted in the North's suing for peace and granting independence to the rebellious Confederacy.

The battle begins

The battle began by chance as Confederate forces converged on the Pennsylvania crossroads town of Gettysburg responding to rumors that there were stocks of shoes that were sorely needed by the rag-tag southern troops. Federal troops in the area fought a delaying battle with the massed Confederates and were successful in holding the high ground, a tactic that eventually resulted in a Union victory.

An uncharacteristic failure of Confederate top army leadership

As things turned out, Gettysburg was a remarkable deviation from the excellent record of Confederate leadership and coordination in besting the Yankees on the battlefield. Confederate generals were under strict orders not to engage the Yankee forces until General Lee could evaluate the situation.

The first skirmishes at Gettysburg on the first day quickly developed into a situation where Lee had to react without full knowledge of Yankee strength and disposition. Lee, whose cavalry commander Jeb Stuart was out of contact harassing the Federal rear instead of providing intelligence to Lee, also put Lee in a poor tactical situation.

Also, the reticence and lack of aggression on the part of Lee's generals during the second day of the battle caused Lee to make a rash and impatient decision to frontally attack the Yankees, who held the high ground.

Lee's impatience overcame good tactics

Compounding Lee's poor tactical situation was his own stubbornness and anxiety to engage the enemy where the enemy offered battle. His main lieutenant, General Longstreet, begged Lee not to attack the entrenched Yankees, but to shift his forces to the East and fight the Yankees on a more favorable ground.

The disaster at Cemetery Ridge

Lee refused and insisted on ordering a frontal charge up a hilly slope where his troops were enveloped by a murderous Yankee artillery fire that broke the back of a poorly coordinated and doomed attack.

Lee's attack up Cemetery Ridge very nearly succeeded, but the Yankees rallied and inflicted terrible casualties on the brave Confederate troops, who were mowed down by concentrated fire power.

In one of the bloodiest battles in American history, both sides suffered nearly 50,000 dead, wounded, or missing. General Pickett would never forgive "that old man" (Lee) for ordering that foolish charge.

Lee withdraws

Lee recognized the futility of pressing another attack and decided to cut his losses and withdraw. The Union commander, Meade, was in no mood to pursue a defeated but still dangerous enemy. Instead, Meade sent a flowery telegram to Lincoln to the effect that the enemy had been driven out of the "sacred soil of Pennsylvania" (Meade was a Pennsylvanian).

When Lincoln read the telegram, he was beside himself with anger and disappointment that Meade had not taken advantage of an opportunity to destroy Lee's beaten army.

Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address

Lincoln, recognizing the advantage and significance of this victory, albeit incomplete, drafted his famous Gettysburg Address, which he delivered during the cemetery dedication ceremony in Gettysburg.

In a briefly worded speech, President Lincoln encapsulated what, to him, was the current struggle was all about. Lincoln knew that the dedication of a cemetery with its fancy words and attending big wigs was of far less importance than the dead who were being honored:

"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Gettysburg was the South's last chance

The Civil War would go on for nearly two more years and the blood-letting would continue unabated until, bled out, the Confederacy lost its capacity to resist. Gettysburg, however, was the South's last chance to gain a military victory that might have resulted in foreign intervention and recognition of the Confederacy.

General Lee took full responsibility for the defeat and even offered to resign. Jefferson Davis, however, had little choice but to keep his best commander in charge.

More good news for the North out west

Meanwhile, out west, another Union commander, U.S. Grant, secured the surrender of the Confederate bastion of Vicksburg, Mississippi, dealing yet another strategic blow from which the South would never recover. Grant would come East and meet Lee in yet another ghastly round of battles which in terms of dead and wounded would dwarf even Gettysburg. (See the next article on this page.)