

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Command Frictions in the Gettysburg Campaign

By Philip M. Cole

Frictions

Von Clausewitz aptly described the “frictions” of war:

War is a special province of chance, and the gods of luck rise to full stature on the field of battle. Uncertainty and confusion are inseparable from combat: “Every action...only produces a counteraction on the enemy’s part, and the thousands of interlocking actions throw up millions of little frictions, accidents and chances, from which there emanates an all-embracing fog of uncertainty...the unknown is the first-born son of combat and uncertainty is its other self.”¹

Frictions are the constant streams of obstacles thrown in the way of planning and the governor of progress. Each friction requires a different solution. Each challenge is a diversion from the planned objective. Each unplanned task saps an army’s resources needed elsewhere. Resolution calls for concentrated skills, creative imagination, and improvisation to correct reverses. Collectively, frictions steered the armies into making major decisions and altering or reversing existing plans. They drew commanders’ attention to less important details in operations at the expense of maintaining balance over the big picture.

Command frictions are timeless in the history of warfare. No battles are devoid of them. Because it is widely understood, the Civil War provides a great opportunity to study the impact of these frictions. Gettysburg, in particular, illustrates this through many important actions of this campaign.

Command frictions affected many important actions in the Gettysburg story: They altered General Robert E. Lee’s original plan to move towards Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and diverted the Army of Northern Virginia to Gettysburg; they caused forward elements of the Confederate army to provoke a general engagement against

¹ S. A. Stouffer and E. A. Suchman, *The American Soldier, Combat and its Aftermath*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 2:83.

Lee's instructions. In the Army of the Potomac, they caused a great deal of confusion in recognizing who was in charge at any one time or place.

Command Frictions

The chain of command is a design with defined paths for orders or information to flow. In today's American army, many agree that a clear chain of command is critical to the success of our military forces. When all subordinates know whose orders they are to obey and when all superiors know who are to obey their orders, the frictions affecting control are greatly diminished and the system works. While this system is sensible and a good guideline, it relies on protocols which could vary. Any divergence puts pre-established order out of balance.²

Crossing Spheres of Commands

Command frictions manifest themselves in a major way when army units in motion, operating outside their normal jurisdictions, must interact within other stationary forces' assigned territories (spheres of command). As an example, when Major General Joseph Hooker's army moved northward in the Gettysburg campaign, his army grew in strength. By entering friendly territory it added troops from other military departments or spheres of command.

The accretion of men from other sources, however, introduced complications. The Army of the Potomac was entering space outside of Hooker's traditional control. In maneuvering to the movements of Confederate forces, it would brush by or pass over territory protected by military departments with fixed geographic areas. To assist Hooker, the forces from three military districts would, according to circumstance, support, reinforce, be absorbed into, or intermingle with other commands.

As both armies pressed northward, the tension was building for a probable engagement. The difficulty in maintaining a clear chain of command increased as additional units within those territories were absorbed into Hooker's force and entered into joint operations. Units pulled from the military departments now had a different commanding-general and, in the process of transferring power, the chain of command was blurred.

Temporarily restructuring the chain of command could work if certain considerations were attended to: 1. Only one person could act as commanding-general to coordinate operations during an exceedingly fluid situation; 2. The commanding-general must have a clear understanding as to which forces were "loaned" for his use; 3. He must know their disposition and troop strength (Hooker was not up to speed as to their troop strengths or dispositions); 4. Information on the restructured chain of command must be

² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); <http://www.answers.com/topic/chain-of-command> , accessed July 10, 2014.

quickly promulgated within the Army of the Potomac and the military districts participating; 5. Hooker and the military departments' commanders-in-chief must act cooperatively and in unison.

On June 22, 1863, Major General Henry Wager Halleck offered General Hooker assistance. Hooker then issued orders to his newly assigned troops within the departments. Although the temporary chain of command was established, the system was quickly beginning to run into problems in recognizing who was in charge. On June 25, Hooker was made aware of a dispatch sent by Brigadier General Samuel Wylie Crawford, division commander, Army of the Potomac. Crawford said, "A dispatch has been received during the night from General [John] Slough, military governor of Alexandria, informing me that the commanding officer of the Second Brigade, Pennsylvania Reserve Corps, has been instructed by him not to recognize the orders sent to him to prepare to join the division, as directed in your dispatch of June 23." ³

In response, Hooker requested that Halleck punish Slough: "I request that General Slough be arrested at once, and charges will be forwarded as soon as I have time to prepare them. You will find, I fear, when it is too late, that the effort to preserve department lines will be fatal to the cause of the country." Halleck responded, "The Second Brigade, to which you refer in your telegram, forms no part of General Crawford's command, which was placed at your orders. No other troops can be withdrawn from the Defenses of Washington." ⁴

In another situation, Hooker communicated to Halleck: "...I desire that instructions may be given Generals Heintzelman and Schenck to direct their commands to obey promptly any orders they may receive from me. Last evening the colonel commanding at Poolesville responded to his orders to march that he did not belong to my command, but would refer his orders to General Heintzelman. Such delays may bring us reverses. When these instructions are given, I shall not be necessitated to repeat orders to any part of my command to march on the enemy." Hooker's despair over the frictions of command and control was evident when he added, "I request that my orders be sent me to-day, for outside of the Army of the Potomac I don't know whether I am standing on my head or feet." ⁵

Either Washington did not inform Hooker as to what troops were available to him or his staff did not ascertain this information. Hooker's focus should have been riveted on what Lee was doing and not having to spend time on matters deemed administrative. He could little afford to address internal problems from subordinate commanders, supposedly newly assigned to his command, who rejected his

³ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 27, part 1, p. 57 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 57).

⁴ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 56-57.

⁵ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 55-57.

orders. Hooker used up precious time communicating to others in order to establish his authority. Such command problems did not have to be.

While the above examples happened on a strategic level, the effects of command frictions resulting from crossing spheres of command were just as serious in affecting units at the tactical level. In fact, the effects were more immediate and produced rapid conclusions to actions which decided a battle's outcome. At Gettysburg, this was true, especially for the Army of the Potomac. With Major General George Gordon Meade in command, Union forces spent practically the entire battle in a state of motion. From the beginning of the battle until the end, hardly a unit remained in a stationary position. Units either retreated from their original position, advanced from their assigned position, or were sent to reinforce or support other parts of the line. Most of the shifting forces transited along the battle front laterally, across other spheres of command. Any units crossing over terrain assigned to other commanders who were superior in rank were subject to the whims of those officers.

Consequently, units were snatched up in transit by desperate commanders seeking assistance, regardless of any dire need for help at their intended destination. Others were slowed down, stopped, or otherwise prevented from attending to emergencies elsewhere. Lieutenant. G. G. Benedict, Vermont Brigade, said, “[The brigade] succeeded only in reaching the ground as the last guns were fired from Cemetery Hill [July 1st]. It marched in on the left, over ground which was occupied by the enemy the next morning, and after some marching and counter-marching, under contradictory orders from different corps commanders, three of whom assumed immediate command of the Brigade, was allowed to halt and drop to rest on the left of Cemetery Hill.”⁶

In another instance, Lieutenant Colonel Adolphus Dobke, 45th N.Y. Infantry, 11th Corps reported:

....In the evening [July 2nd], at dark, a sudden attack was made on the Twelfth Corps, on our right, and the Forty-fifth Regiment ordered to support. For a mile through the complete darkness in the woods this regiment pushed up to the stone fence through an incessant shower of bullets, and shared well in the defense of this position [Culp's Hill]. It is to be mentioned that while the regiment marched in the darkness through the woods, under guide of a staff officer, the march was considerably delayed by a number of general staff officers, each exerting himself to give his orders, and so, by movements, counter-movements, halts, &c., some time elapsed before the regiment found itself in the right place behind the fence....⁷

⁶ James L. McLean, Jr. and Judy W. Mclean, comps. *Gettysburg Sources*, 3 vols. (Baltimore, OH: Butternut and Blue, 1990), 1:90.

⁷ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 735.

Still another example, Captain A. P. Martin, commanding artillery brigade, 5th Corps reported:

[July 2nd] “Battery C, Massachusetts Artillery, and I, Fifth U.S. Artillery, were left in the rear of the line of battle of the First Division, with instructions to await orders. When positions had been selected and orders sent for the batteries to move to the front, they were not to be found. Subsequently, Battery C, Massachusetts Artillery, was found in the rear of the Third Corps. The officer commanding reported that he had been ordered there by an officer of General Sickles’ staff, who had orders to take any batteries he could find, no matter where they belonged. Battery I, Fifth U.S. Artillery, was taken in the same way, thus depriving the Fifth Corps of its proper amount of artillery.”⁸

Changes in the Chain of Command

Command adjustments in battle, especially during the Civil War, were frequent and constant. Battle losses were expected and inevitable. They were abrupt and unforeseen. Changes, even in cases where better officers replaced less effective ones, were, nevertheless, disruptive in the flow of operations: they severed familiar links of communication, they interrupted leadership continuity during critical moments, they caused orders to be challenged by anyone not notified of the command change, and they disrupted continuity between commander and subordinate.

Continuity of leadership in any organization is important. Constancy created stability. Stability preserved relationships. Familiarity of personnel within an organization, even if subordinates and superiors did not get along, at the very least provided a level of understanding with which to interact.

Conversely, lost continuity from command changes was accompanied by a degree of caution between commander and subordinate and a sense of the unknown. The dynamics of communications were altered, working relationships ended, and old alliances, formed between superior and subordinate, were exchanged for those yet to be formed. Even if subordinates knew replacement commanders from working with them in a lesser role, new positions called for different relationships. Former acquaintances were now either peers, subordinates or superior officers.

The replacement of General Hooker by George Meade gives us a powerful example of fracturing the chain of command and breaking the continuity of leadership. The change was abrupt and unforeseen and happened just three days before the battle of Gettysburg. Meade received his promotion unexpectedly. He was untested in the role of army commander. The transition was an overwhelming challenge—adjusting from

⁸ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 660.

leading his former command, the V Corps, of 13,000 men to controlling an entire army with a force approaching 100,000.⁹

With the army in motion, command transition was especially difficult. General Hooker had already established a rhythm of countermoves against those made by the Army of Northern Virginia. To maintain continuity, it was critical for General Hooker to brief Meade on the state of affairs and for the new commanding-general to receive counsel from his corps commanders. However, in the meeting transferring the command, Hooker gave Meade no intimation of any plan he was considering nor any views he held. In addition, Meade's cavalry and seven infantry corps commanders were scattered over wide areas of the countryside and could not assemble to share their views and current intelligence. (The first time Meade met with them as a group was at the end of the second day's battle at Gettysburg. By then, two of the seven infantry commanders had been killed or wounded.)¹⁰

Meade inherited Hooker's handpicked men. He needed them. Members of that staff were the only ones who knew the big picture and how to maintain continuity in the operation—the general state of affairs, the status of existing orders, the level of supplies, the deployment and availability of forces, and the fighting condition of units.

The Army of Northern Virginia lost command continuity as well. Before the army moved to start the Gettysburg campaign, major modifications in the chain of command occurred. General Lee re-arranged his army from two large infantry corps into three smaller ones. In addition, other Confederate forces were pulled from outside regions and added to the rolls of the Army of Northern Virginia. Consequently, the command continuity of both armies was broken. New relationships and new styles of command were introduced, and, in turn, added to the frictions of command.

Breaking continuity of command meant changes in leadership style. Style changes disrupted working relationships between persons accustomed to the thought and behavior patterns of others as well as an understanding of others' expectations and limitations. Severed relationships changed routines of interaction. The standards demanded by a former commander were not identical to those of his replacement. Meade, for example, was suddenly operating an army imprinted with Hooker's style.

Familiarity with a commander's style affected the way orders were interpreted and understood by others. Undoubtedly, in the charged atmosphere of a battle it was better to plan and make decisions with a team that held nurtured relationships than to strategize with a group of strangers or even acquaintances unused to working together in a new capacity.

⁹ Busey & Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg*, 4th ed. (Hightstown, N. J., Longstreet House, 2005), 16.

¹⁰ George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, 2 vols. (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 2: 3.

Time was the critical element in building relationships within a command. One of the most powerful forms of bonding was collaborating as a team to perform tasks. Relationships were formed through interactions: conversing, exchanging ideas, sharing advice, or critiquing. Other than known reputations, there were no shortcuts for new commanders to bond and gain the respect, trust, confidence, and cooperation of their men. Time was needed to set personal examples, for commanders to communicate what was expected from subordinates, and to create an atmosphere which elicited honest answers and willing obedience.

Formed relationships established intuitive ability—the natural intelligence to understand things without having to lay out all the details. “Reading” a leader’s mind to discern his intentions was an acquired process and not automatically transferred when a new commander took over. Intuition, created from formed relationships, was an invisible communications system which provided the knowledge to know what actions were needed. Prior to Gettysburg, the familiar relationship between Lee and his two infantry corps commanders, Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson and Lieutenant General James Longstreet, is often used as a model for the intuitive rapport that existed in this trio of generals. Lee gave directives to his two corps commanders, using minimum details, and they were able to sense what Lee wanted.

Unfamiliarity within a group, on the other hand, characteristically held back honest opinions. In an unfamiliar atmosphere, subordinates were less likely to object to a superior’s ideas or give frank advice. (It is interesting to note that some of Meade’s subordinate commanders, who were unfamiliar with Meade in his new role as commanding-general, were the ones that offered no objections to his plans during the battle of Gettysburg yet turned out to be the greatest critics of his decisions.) Unfamiliarity also did not lend itself to unit cohesiveness. There was no substitute for the rapport built from interactions, struggles, deprivations, and achievements experienced as a team. Professionalism alone did not insure cooperation.¹¹

Familiarity, at least, meant that officers were more likely to bend or break the rules and circumvent the chain of command to address an emergency situation. On July 2 for example, Colonel Patrick O’Rorke’s 140th New York Infantry broke the chain of command by ignoring an existing order to move forward to help Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles and, instead, assisted Brigadier General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, Chief of Engineers, by rerouting to Little Round Top. The chief reason for O’Rorke’s cooperation was due to familiarity. Warren was his former brigade commander. Had O’Rorke not recognized Warren, perhaps he would not have risked a court martial by ignoring the standing order of his brigade. O’Rorke’s decision to divert his regiment was instrumental in securing the hill.

¹¹ Kerry Patterson, et al, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), xii.

With respect to the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee possessed the invaluable benefit of familiarity in the role of commanding-general over the newly appointed Meade. Lee had held the position for over a year and officers in his army were well acquainted with their leader. Officers in the Army of the Potomac, on the other hand, were subjected to a succession of commanding-generals that seemed never-ending. Each commander imprinted his style and each battle lost brought forth another commanding-general. Meade was the seventh in a little more than two years.

When the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia struck their tents to start the Gettysburg campaign, no one could anticipate the magnitude of change that would befall the leadership in the upcoming operation. Besides the recently reorganized Army of Northern Virginia, revisions in leadership for the Army of the Potomac would be just as dramatic as the campaign progressed. As mentioned earlier, the Army of the Potomac added units from other military departments and state militias prepared to assist with the emergency. In the process, new chains of command were created with new leaders and unfamiliar relationships.

As new chains of command were formed, relationships between former commander and subordinate dissolved along with leadership style, continuity, and familiarity. At Gettysburg, the Lee/Longstreet/Jackson team was gone, along with the rapport that existed with it. Now it was the Lee/Longstreet/Ewell/Hill team.

Gettysburg was the first battle to test these new relationships. If Lee continued to operate and issue orders in the same style as he did with the old group, it could be viewed as a subtle expression of confidence that his new team possessed the intuitive skills necessary to interact like the old group. However, to presume that all would react to “reading” their commander’s customary broad instructions with the intuitive ability of the old group, would have risky consequences for an untested team in its first battle. The new corps commanders surely needed the supervision of the commanding-general, through his staff, to insure they understood their new roles and that they would be instructed with enough information to achieve their assignments.

On the Union side, the command styles of Hooker and Meade were strikingly different. General Hooker’s style practiced one of caution. He shared his plans in a general way without communicating details to his subordinates. General Meade, when he was still a corps commander, wrote his wife about Hooker’s style: “[He] is remarkably reticent of his information and plans; I really know nothing of what he intends to do, or when or where he proposes doing anything...[Secrecy] may be carried too far, and important plans may be frustrated by subordinates, from their ignorance of how much depended on their share of work.”¹²

General Hooker’s style suppressed the exchange of important information central to any plans. Consequently, in order to implement the wishes of the commanding-

¹² Meade, *Life and Letters*, 1: 367.

general, actions depended solely on blind loyalty and ignored any valuable input from subordinates, ignorant of details in plans. This deficiency inevitably led to trouble.

Meade's style, as commanding-general, on the other hand, was the opposite of Hooker's. He shared information with his corps commanders by informing them of the latest military situation, he advised them of what his short-term plans were, he treated them more like equals than as subordinates, he sought cooperation and advice from them, and his plans were influenced by their views.

Personal Relationships

It is human nature, in any setting, that there are conflicting relationships within groups of people. The military is no exception. Different types of relationships produced different results; consequently, relationships between commanders and subordinates affected the progress of operations. A stern commander, not respected by subordinates, for example, who issued instructions more as a mechanical process or communicated in an abrasive manner, may have prodded his subordinates to obey his wishes, but responding to orders was likely done with less commitment than those that willingly followed orders from a trusted leader. Conversely, subordinates, who held the greatest respect for their commanders and confidence that they were always right, may have suppressed opinions or advice that could have helped make better decisions.

The relationship between General Hooker and his superiors in Washington illustrates a command friction at the highest level and the poisonous effects of disharmony cast upon an army operation. After an embarrassing defeat at Chancellorsville in May, 1863, Hooker lost the trust of his superiors. He suffered especially from a poor relationship with his immediate superior in Washington, General Halleck. Hooker was under intense pressure from Washington to stop Lee's northward moves. He needed a morale booster, encouragement and support from his superiors.

On June 16, instead of uplifting advice, Hooker received a barrage of directives that nettled and isolated him. General Hooker's sense of helplessness in dealing with General Halleck was revealed in a message to President Lincoln seeking him to act as an intermediary. The President, however, was not about to circumvent the chain of command. Later that day Lincoln responded to Hooker: "To remove all misunderstanding, I now place you in the strict military relation to General Halleck of a commander of one of the armies to the general-in-chief of all the armies. I have not intended differently, but as it seems to be differently understood, I shall direct him to give you orders and you to obey them."¹³

The abrasive relationship with Halleck and Lincoln's rebuff to the request for mediation, stopped General Hooker from seeking any support and advice from his Washington superiors. Every suggestion he offered them regarding countermoves

¹³ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 47.

against Lee's army was rejected. When Brigadier General Hermann Haupt inquired about his next maneuver, Hooker said he would move nowhere without orders to do so, he would follow instructions literally, and let the blame fall where it belonged. Hooker was already a defeated commander before the battle began. His self-confidence was deflated, his drive and aggressiveness in crushing Lee's army had vanished.¹⁴

It is appalling that all participants in this matter allowed the relationships to degrade to the level where it affected the welfare of tens of thousands of soldiers. Soldiers expect their commander-in-chief to achieve the goal assigned and that lives must be sacrificed in the process. But they also expect that risk assessment and the measure of human costs figure into the commander's equation of conducting an operation. General Hooker's dispirited remark is devoid of such considerations.

Abrasive relationships at all levels of command affected communication and operational decisions. While this condition cannot be measured, it can at least be said that it lent itself to suppressing communications, not reporting true conditions, "feeding" information in a way to avoid censure, or simply giving in and blindly following suggestions from superiors without efforts to correct any flawed assumptions they may have possessed.

But even positive relationships had a downside to communications. A headquarters command, surrounded by staff and aides who were often friends and relatives eager to assist their leader, created a family atmosphere but it affected the quality of communication (Meade, for example, used his own son as an aide at Gettysburg). Such relationships altered important information which a commander should receive unadulterated. Friends and relatives were likely to shield their beloved commander from outside criticism. Such criticism could contain suggestions and ideas overlooked in the commander's decision-making process. In planning operations, it did a general no good to hear praise on the brilliance of his ideas from a supportive group, absent legitimate criticism, and leaving the commander with a sense of infallibility.

Command Changes: The Domino Effect

Combat casualties caused the majority of command changes in the Gettysburg campaign. Frequent exposure to danger and resultant casualties of generals created openings at the top, which, in turn, triggered a domino effect down the chain of command. While General Hooker's departure was by resignation, consider the cascade effect caused at the commanding-general's level. On June 28, 1863, General Hooker was replaced by the V Corps commander, General Meade. Meade's corps command was filled by the V Corps' division commander, Major General George Sykes. Sykes' division command was filled by brigade commander, Brigadier General Romeyn Beck Ayres. Ayres' brigade command was filled by regimental commander, Colonel Hannibal

¹⁴ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 45, 47; Walter H. Herbert, *Fighting Joe Hooker*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 239.

Day. Day's regimental command [at Gettysburg with 5 companies] was filled by Capt. Levi C. Bootes. And so on down the line within the regiment from Lieutenant Colonel, Major, Captain, and First Lieutenant.

Additionally, battles casualties suddenly caused hundreds of revisions across the army. During the first day's battle at Gettysburg, for example, Brigadier General Gabriel René Paul, Union brigade commander, suffered a severe wound during the defense of Oak Ridge. The brigade command transferred to Colonel Samuel H. Leonard, 13th Massachusetts. After Leonard was wounded, the command transferred to Colonel Adrian Rowe Root, 94th New York. After Root was wounded, the command transferred to Colonel Richard Coulter, 11th Pennsylvania. Under heavy fire during the cannonade on July 3, Colonel Coulter, then on Cemetery Hill, was wounded and temporarily disabled. The command was transferred to Colonel Peter Lyle, 90th Pennsylvania, but soon after, Colonel Coulter recovered enough and resumed command of the brigade.¹⁵

In another example, on July 2, the 11th New Jersey Infantry regiment, III Corps, had its leadership decimated while fighting near the Klingel Farm along the Emmitsburg road. In this action, the regiment's commander, Colonel Robert McAllister, fell severely wounded by a Minié ball in his left leg and a piece of shell in his right foot. Major Philip J. Kearny, the next most senior officer present, was struck by a Minié ball in the knee. Both McAllister and Kearny were carried to the rear. Captain Luther Martin, the senior officer present, then took over command. Soon Captain Martin along with Captain Doraster Logan were wounded and then killed while being taken to the rear. A moment later, Captain Andrew Ackerman fell dead and Captain William H. Lloyd was wounded. Lieutenant John Schoonover, the senior officer present, assumed and remained in command despite being twice wounded.¹⁶

At Gettysburg, the Official Records for the Army of the Potomac's Order of Battle listed 170 command changes; the Official Records for the Army of Northern Virginia's Order of Battle listed 101 command changes. These figures do not include Meade's promotion, the restructuring of Lee's army near the beginning of the campaign, the temporary appointments to wing commanders, or promotions triggered within regiments below the command level.

¹⁵ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 290.

¹⁶ *O.R.* I, 27, pt. 1, 544, 553-4.

| Level of Change | Army of the Potomac | Army of Northern Virginia |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Corps | 4 | 0 |
| Division | 6 | 5 |
| Brigade | 25 | 19 |
| Regiment | 118 | 71 |
| Artillery Reserve | 1 | 0 |
| Artillery Brig./Btn. | 1 | 1 |
| Batteries | <u>15</u> | <u>5</u> |
| Total | 170 | 101 ¹⁷ |

Command Changes in Supporting Roles

In addition, any units used as a reserve in combat were subject to being broken apart piecemeal with scattered commands sent to support anyplace on the field where needed. In the process, fragmented commands lost its leadership. On July 2, for example, Union Colonel George C. Burling, III Corps, had his infantry brigade temporarily disassembled into regiments and singly disbursed to support others needing emergency assistance. This dismantled force resulted in a commander without a brigade and his staff who were relegated to mere spectators. “My command” Burling wrote, “now all being taken from me and separated, no two regiments being together, and being under the command of the different brigade commanders to whom they had reported, I, with my staff, reported to General Humphreys for instructions, remaining with him for some time.” Major General John Sedgwick also suffered a similar plight when his Union VI Corps arrived on the field and was parceled out for use at different points.¹⁸

Frictions with: Senior Commander on the Field/Wing Commands/Corps Commands

The title *senior commander on the field* needs no explanation other than to say that it transferred the command responsibility to the senior-most officer present. If another more senior officer arrived, he took command. This transfer of command and corresponding responsibility was traditionally done by seniority protocol but it disregarded the fact that new, more senior arrivals knew the least about what had already happened, what was then happening, and what was about to happen. When Union General Henry Warner Slocum arrived at Gettysburg on July 1, for example, he was the senior commander on the field but was uninterested and ill prepared in taking over a situation he knew little or nothing about.

¹⁷ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 155-68; *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 2, 283-91.

¹⁸ *O.R. I*, 27, pt. 1, 571.

Wing Commands

On the roads leading to Gettysburg, seven Union infantry corps were scattered over hundreds of square miles. In the absence of the commanding-general it was essential to have a coordinator for units too distant for army headquarters to control. To do this, the Army of the Potomac used wing commanders. Wing commands were to be used as a command of maneuver, to coordinate cooperation within a wing, or with another wing. Wing commanders were senior corps commanders assigned temporary control over two or more other corps.

The domino effect in the use of wing commands was almost as dramatic as the change in commanding-general mentioned above. When General John Fulton Reynolds was acting as wing commander, for example, General Abner Doubleday's role was upgraded from senior division commander to I Corps commander, the senior brigade commander was bumped up to division command, the senior regimental commander was bumped up to brigade command, and so on within the regiment down to the company level.

Just before Gettysburg, on June 30, in the absence of General Meade, General Reynolds was assigned to command the right wing of the Union army (which later became the left wing at Gettysburg.) The wing included the I, III, and XI Corps. Reynolds ordinarily commanded the I Corps but he relinquished this command to General Doubleday. On July 2, General Slocum was temporarily assigned to command the right wing which included the V, VI, and XII Corps. He acted in this capacity from July 1 to July 5. Ordinarily he commanded the XII Corps but he relinquished this command to General Alpheus Starkey Williams.

Corps Commands

At Gettysburg, the Army of Northern Virginia had three large infantry corps numbering about 21,000 men each. The Army of the Potomac had seven smaller infantry corps averaging about 12,000 men each. Having larger corps, but fewer of them, had benefits: it reduced bureaucracy and staff requirements in the organization; it simplified the chain of command by needing fewer avenues of communication; it permitted faster decision-making, unfettered by multiple opinions and disagreements. The larger Confederate infantry corps also protected more ground than their enemy counterparts. This feature lent itself to handling situations within their own spheres of operation by supplying support controlled by the same corps commander and, therefore, lessened the need for outside help. Conversely, fewer commanders meant less talent to draw from and less experience to help in planning; fewer staffs were not able to deal with as many details as the staffs of their enemy counterparts.

The Army of the Potomac, having smaller corps and more of them, had benefits as well: smaller corps increased mobility. It was easier to assemble or move a smaller, self-contained infantry corps without separating its command (beneficial in the campaign

but not too beneficial at Gettysburg). More corps provided flexibility in performing a greater number of missions. Conversely, smaller corps protected less ground, the need for help beyond the corps command was greater and complicated matters when units crossed other spheres of command. With smaller corps, Meade had to deal with seven commanders, either indirectly through headquarters staff or through personal visits on the field, interviews at headquarters, or in a group council. By having a greater number of corps commanders, consensus was more difficult to achieve (Differing opinions in councils were evident from votes taken.). Consensus, however, was not as important as having more relevant ideas presented in discussions to help the commanding-general plan his next moves.

The roles of senior commander on the field, wing commander, and corps commander seemed to blend into indistinguishable roles and cause serious command frictions for the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg. Command changes which created more frictions were caused by death or injury, arrivals of senior officers, and deviations from seniority protocol. The revisions in the Army of the Potomac's high command were significant. The following is just a sample of one day's activity, July 1, and reflects the fluid nature of an army concentrating during a battle.

The battle began with General John Buford, cavalry division commander, acting as *senior commander on the field*. General John Reynolds, *left wing commander*, arrived, took over as *senior commander on the field*, and was killed shortly thereafter. After Reynolds' death, General Abner Doubleday, then acting as I Corps commander, took over [briefly] and issued orders as senior commander on the field.¹⁹ General. Oliver Otis Howard, XI corps commander, arrived and after hearing of Reynolds' death, took over and issued orders as *senior commander on the field*. General. Winfield Hancock, II Corps commander, arrived. Although junior to Howard, but by order of General Meade, Hancock took over as *senior commander on the field*. This broke the seniority protocol, causing an additional command friction. General Henry Slocum, XII Corps commander, arrived and took over as *senior commander on the field* after Hancock departed. Finally General Meade arrived around midnight and took over as commanding-general.

Some additional confusion as to who was in command on July 1 was attributed to Brigadier General Thomas Algeo Rowley. He was promoted from his I Corps brigade command to acting commander of General Doubleday's division. At one point, after General Reynolds' death and for some unknown reason, Rowley thought he was the I Corps commander. He rode about giving orders to troops, some apparently unintelligible. Colonel Charles S. Wainwright and others thought he was drunk. When he withdrew towards Gettysburg, he fell off his horse and had to be helped out of a ditch.

¹⁹ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 245-6, (Upon learning of Reynolds' death, Doubleday said: "The whole burden of the battle was thus suddenly thrown upon me," and "All this (action at the railroad cut) was accomplished in less than half an hour, and before General Howard had arrived on the field or assumed command.")

Later that day he was arrested and removed from the battlefield under guard. (His next duty assignment was a draft office in Maine.)²⁰

Lack of Notification

Without notification, subordinate commanders could not keep pace with command changes and, consequently, the chain of command blurred. During the time of the change from Howard to Hancock on July 1, General Meade, at Taneytown, Maryland, received a copy of a message from General.. Howard, as senior commander, (written before Hancock's takeover) to General Sickles, in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which ordered the III Corps to Gettysburg. Since Meade had placed Hancock in command over Howard, Meade sent off a dispatch to Sickles canceling Howard's directive and "to hold on until you hear from General Hancock." (Meade was concerned about leaving the approaches to Emmitsburg unguarded.) Before Sickles received Meade's dispatch "to hold" he was already moving forward to help Howard, the perceived commander on the field at Gettysburg. At the same time, Sickles, using his own judgment, kept two brigades and two batteries back, "assuming that the approaches through Emmitsburg toward our left and rear must not be uncovered."²¹

Sickles then received Meade's announcement that Hancock was in command at Gettysburg. The confusion as to who was in charge is evident in Sickles' reply to Meade's directive:

General Hancock is not in command—General Howard commands...Nothing less than the earnest and frequent appeals of General Howard, and his supposed danger, could have induced me to move from the position assigned to me in general orders; but I believed the emergency justified my movement. Shall I return to my position at Emmitsburg, or shall I remain and report to Howard?²²

Sickles, despite his later controversy on July 2, must be complimented in the way he handled this conflict of orders. Sickles' intuitive reasoning and his action, eventually approved by Meade, helped limit the confusion as to who was in charge.

Notification was a crucial step in preserving who had the responsibility of the operation and the authority to issue orders. Announcing command changes, however, was difficult to accomplish in battle. Commands were broken apart, temporarily re-assigned to other commands during urgent circumstances, or shuffled about to different parts of the field. Combat conditions slowed down or stopped communication altogether.

²⁰ David G. Martin, *Gettysburg July 1* (Pennsylvania, Combined Books, 1995), 180, 473-4.

²¹ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 3, 466, 468.

²² *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 3, 463-4,466, 468.

Lack of notification could convert a coordinated attack into a series of independent assaults where smaller units operated on their own hook. For example, on July 2, minutes into the Confederate attack against the Union left flank, division commander, General John Bell Hood, was taken out of action with a severe wound. His predetermined replacement was General Evander McIver Law who, at that moment, was leading his Alabama brigade into battle on the far right of the division. Law, uninformed of Hood's wounding, continued leading his men at the brigade level during this entire action. It is unclear when Law assumed command of the division and the existing information on this suggests that Law's guidance at the division level played no important role in the outcome of this action. The division, in effect then, was going into battle as four independent brigades, absent coordination, and short on leadership at the division level.²³

Lack of notification caused misunderstandings and disputes over control of forces or sectors of ground. It happened at the highest levels. One would expect that a handful of generals could, at least, understand each other's role in the operation. In using wing commands, for example, there seemed to be no clear understanding when the wing command assignment terminated. Apparently, termination was an understanding by assumption rather than a formal method of notification.

On July 2, General Meade assigned General.. Slocum as the right wing commander. General Williams, division commander, replaced Slocum as XII Corps commander. Meade, in his after action report, failed to recognize Williams' contribution as a corps commander. He later regretted the omission but also stated he "did not expect or design him to be so." Furthermore, Meade, at his late night war council, on July 2, with headquarters staff and corps commanders, said he was "puzzled to account for (Williams') presence" since Slocum was also there... Meade stated, "I cannot say anything more beyond the fact that General Williams' commanding the corps was not impressed on my mind..."²⁴

Meade told Slocum that at one point he assigned him (Slocum) to prepare an attack on July 2, using the V, VI, and XII Corps, "but inasmuch as both these corps were removed to another part of the field early in the afternoon, and never returned, I presumed you would understand your command over them was only temporary, and ceased with their removal."²⁵

Meade's comment is noteworthy when reviewing the events surrounding the senior command changes on July 1. In brief, using replacement by seniority, General Howard took over as senior commander after the death of General Reynolds and, at the end of the day, General Slocum took over as senior commander. Meade did not issue an order to cause these changes. He simply expected the senior-most commander on the field to take

²³ Harry Pfanz, *Gettysburg, The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 173.

²⁴ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 769-70.

²⁵ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 769.

charge. But in between these two command changes, Meade broke the seniority protocol by placing Hancock in charge. In this instance, Meade undoubtedly, caused some of the confusion by changing the customary seniority protocol but, at the same time, assumed that Slocum, as a wing commander, should have known when to stop this assignment and go back to commanding the XII Corps.

So from Meade's point of view, on July 2 he was initially issuing orders to Slocum as a wing commander, then later that day, as a corps commander. From Slocum's viewpoint he was receiving orders as a wing commander for the remainder of the battle but never as a corps commander. Consequently, Williams was out of the communications loop as acting corps commander from Meade's perspective despite the fact that Slocum had relinquished control of the XII Corps to him.

This confusion of control had the potential to cause severe problems had Williams not received direction from Slocum in his capacity as "wing commander." The effects of this misunderstanding, if any, can only be surmised, but the fact remains that three important commanders, Meade, Slocum, and Williams, were operating with misunderstood responsibilities and issuing or receiving orders in a mistaken capacity and affecting thousands of troops.²⁶

Much of the above confusion in the Army of the Potomac could have been avoided by the ordinary performance of Meade's staff. Keeping commanders current on the status of their command assignment was not a superior feat in the course of a staff function—it was a requirement. Army headquarters was the place to determine when to revoke the assignment of a command. If there was an atmosphere of doubt about this procedure, and there certainly was, attentiveness to handling such a problem was of the utmost importance, especially since it affected such high levels of command. It is obvious that a formal method of notification was needed to terminate temporary assignments rather than relying on any subordinate commander to somehow discern when it was time to conclude them.

Turmoil from changes in the high command for the Army of the Potomac is quite remarkable. It is not difficult to imagine how the rash of changes bred confusion as to who was in control at any one time during the battle. Comparatively, the Army of Northern Virginia had significantly fewer changes in the high commands: the commanding-general remained the same; at the beginning of the battle, Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill's Third Corps division commander, Major General Henry Heth, acted as senior commander on the field followed by the orderly progression of command changes from senior generals' arrivals, including General Lee; there were no disruptions at the corps command level. All three Confederate infantry corps

²⁶ *O.R.*, I, 27, pt. 1, 780, (In his report General Ruger, temporary division commander under General Williams, who was XII corps' acting commander, referred to Slocum as "commanding right of main line"; Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign, a Study in Command* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 314, mentions Slocum as being "in charge of the right wing.")

commanders remained in their leadership positions throughout the battle. None were injured although General. Ewell was shot in his wooden leg.

Conclusion

Command frictions affected every level of command and every stage of the battle. Analyzing these frictions during the Gettysburg campaign points to several conclusions: First, at the higher command levels, the Army of the Potomac experienced substantially more problems related to crossing spheres of command, the disadvantage of switching to a new commanding-general near the eve of battle, numerous other command changes and issues in understanding who was in charge at any one moment. Second, the Army of Northern Virginia entered the campaign with a trio of infantry corps commanders performing as a team for the first time. Its high command was, to a degree, put off balance by vagueness in important instructions or directions which lacked the detail desired by some commanders for expediting the intent of their commanding-general. Third, both armies suffered deficiencies from substandard staff work. Such deficiencies were, with hindsight, often avoidable and had serious consequences to outcomes of operations.

So it must be recognized that results of battles were determined by more factors than just manpower, terrain, or bullets and shells. Gunfire was only the final stage of settling an affair which began with the forced arrangement of men and weapons in attempts to achieve positions, better than those of the enemy, and lock their adversaries in battle to secure victory or prevent defeat.

Frank G. Burke, Acting Archivist of the United States said, “Perhaps every generation must review history in terms of its own experience, not so much rewriting history as reinterpreting it through emphasis on topics not previously thought important.” As a result, generations since have continuously re-molded events with conclusions and emphases quite different from the original versions.²⁷

Anyone who has studied or experienced leading men in battle on any field, in any war, can appreciate and learn from studying the fragile and fluid nature of command. The Gettysburg Campaign aptly illustrates the hardships of operating in a difficult and complex environment. Respect must be paid to the many leaders that sought to overcome the endless stream of obstacles thrown in their path and yet continued to carry on towards victory.

²⁷ Kenneth W. Munden and Henry Putney Beers, *The Union, a Guide to Federal Archives Relating to the Civil War* (National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1986), foreword, iv.