

The Battle of Gettysburg Webcast – Q&A Section

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Answers provided by Dr. Barry J. Shollenberger, Professor of History at American Military University and Dana B. Shoaf, Editor at Civil War Times Magazine

What would have been the chances that Lee could have turned a counter attack into a Confederate victory?

Barry Shollenberger: Great “what-if.” If Meade had counter-attacked directly after the failed Confederate assault on Day #3 (highly unlikely) Lee might still have “won the day.” A look at previous campaigns (and future ones – since we have the benefit of “20-20 hindsight”) shows that only Gaines Mill (7 Days) and the “end-run” at Chancellorsville were Lee’s extremely successful assaults on the Army of the Potomac. By far, Lee’s best fighting was on the defensive.

Dana Shoaf: For Lee to have launched a counterattack, the Federals would have had to launch their own attack, and I find that very unlikely. Meade was committed to staying on the defensive.

Was Lee's health situation a factor in his decision to make the charge on day three?

Dana Shoaf: I don’t think so. Lee was a good enough of a general not to let his health interfere with his army’s operations.

Although tactically the battle of Gettysburg did not have a large impact on the outcome of the civil war, does it not have a large impact strategically in the South did not make another major raid into the North?

Dana Shoaf: I would say that Jubal Early’s raid north of the Potomac River in 1864, which resulted in the Battle of Monocacy, was yet another major raid.

Is the movie "Gettysburg" grossly inaccurate or is it somewhat true to life?

Dana Shoaf: It’s not inaccurate, but it does ignore the exploits of a number of generals on both sides. Remember, Gettysburg the movie is the adaptation of a novel, not precisely the historical event.

How accurate is the depiction of Colonel Chamberlain in "The Killer Angels" and, subsequently, the film "Gettysburg"?

Barry Shollenberger: The book “captures” the dilemma experienced by Chamberlain on the extreme end of the Union line. Having been ordered to hold his position “at all hazards” (even rhetoric professors know what that means!) he had no choice but to die or attack with a bayonet charge (his troops were out of ammunition). I must admit, while reading the book, I was “caught up” in what he would do (even though I already knew).

Dana Shoaf: To be honest, it’s been a while since I’ve seen the film, so I’m not sure I’m comfortable answering this with any certainty. My recollection is that the movie did capture his sense of duty and love for the Union.

Does Reynolds really deserve so much credit for setting up the Union victory at Gettysburg, or was it simply where he was forced to enter the fight?

Barry Shollenberger: It was Reynolds who should get credit for “selecting” the Gettysburg battlefield. He was well aware of Meade’s preference for defending the Pipe Creek Line (in northern Maryland about 15 miles southeast of Gettysburg) that was being fortified as the opening events in Gettysburg were unfolding. Reynolds quickly assessed the military, topographical, logistical, and practical aspects of the moment (as he met Buford) and immediately sent a courier back to Meade telling him to “abandon” Pipe Creek and send all available forces to Gettysburg.

Give Meade credit for respecting Reynolds’ judgment in such an important matter. He had only been commanding the Army of the Potomac for 3 days and you can imagine his angst in complying with Reynolds’ request. At the same time, a case could be made for Reynolds (at that time) being the very best general officer in the Army of the Potomac. So, maybe it wasn’t too hard for Meade to do what he did: abandon the Pike Creek Line and send his troops off to their most “shining hour” thus far in the war.

Dana Shoaf: I think it's hard to give any one Union commander credit for day one. Buford, certainly should get some, and Reynolds does deserve credit for hustling his corps to Gettysburg. But others should get credit as well. After all Oliver Howard's XI Corps fought well—even though they eventually gave way—and also bought time to keep the high ground secure. Another point to remember is that Reynolds is shot and out of the fight pretty quickly. Abner Doubleday did a good job stepping in for him as commander of the I Corps, and should get credit for that.

Was General McClellan involved in this Campaign?

Dana Shoaf: No. He was out of the war by this time.

Why didn't Lee send elements of his army east and west to flank the Union Army?

Barry Shollenberger: Day two was Lee's attempt to outflank the Union Army. He would attack the *southern* flank (the "fishhook" was arrayed – generally - North and South) with Longstreet's 1st Corps and the *southern* flank with Ewell's 2nd Corps. When these two efforts proved to be "unsuccessful" (by the narrowest of margins – especially Longstreet's effort), Lee determined to attack the center of Meade's line (his reasoning being that if the flanks were that strong, there couldn't be enough troops available to resist an attack on the center).

Dana Shoaf: I'm not sure I understand the question. If Lee had sent elements of his army west he would be in retreat, and the Army of the Potomac was to the east.

Was Nathan Bedford Forrest involved in these engagements leading up to Gettysburg?

Dana Shoaf: No, he was in the Western Theater of the war.

In regards to the correct answer for the poll question, "Which of the following was NOT a reason that Lincoln used to select Meade to succeed Hooker as commander of the AOP?" can you tell us your source for this answer? I've never seen anything that said Lincoln had said or written this regarding Meade's selection.

Barry Shollenberger: I first ran across this hint of Lincoln's political concern for his high-ranking generals in Coddington's book and it was later confirmed when Grant was made General-in-Chief of all Union Forces in March of 1864 (Lincoln had to make sure Grant had no political ambitions before the appointment). Remember, by June 1863, McClellan had already become a prime Democratic candidate for consideration and would, shortly, be selected as the Democratic presidential candidate for the election of 1864.

Was the relief of Vicksburg by troops transferred Lee's army a realistic prospect?

Dana Shoaf: I don't think so. Even Lee realized that by the time any of his troops would have been able to make it that far West, the matter would likely have been decided. To quote him: "If anything can be done in that quarter, It will be over by that time [my troops get there] as the climate in June will force the enemy to retire.

There's always a lot of discussion as to 'could the Confederates have won the battle'. Is there is a point (or points) when decisions or strategy could have changed the outcome favoring the South?

Barry Shollenberger: Most Gettysburg historians generally believe the Confederacy's best chance "came and went" on Day #1 when Ewell's 2nd Corps failed to aggressively attack and seize Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill.

Dana Shoaf: Sure—some sort of miracle could have occurred, or Meade could have made a huge blunder, but that didn't happen. I'm not trying to be snide, but I think the Rebels chance to win were pretty slim.

I am writing my thesis on this very topic Lee's Northern Offensive. Wouldn't you agree that this was one of the few times he went on the offensive?

Dana Shoaf: Well, Lee went of the offensive in the Seven Days' Campaign, the 2nd Bull Run Campaign, and the Antietam Campaign as well.

I am fascinated to see that in spite of Gettysburg many in the confederacy still believed that Lee emerged victorious because he was able to full-fill his objectives with the Northern offensive. Would you agree?

Dana Shoaf: Yes, I do think that many on the Southern home front saw the campaign for a greater victory than it was. But in reality, he also left many objectives unfulfilled, He did not threaten a major city, did not destroy the Union army, and did not shift European views on the war.

Was General Reynolds considered to take command of The Army of the Potomac at one point?

Dana Shoaf: He was considered for that post, yes.

Would you not think that Lee was emboldened by his previous victories instead of seeing this northern invasion as an act of desperation?

Dana Shoaf: I really think Lee was in a situation where he had no option but to move north and hope for the best. He couldn't retreat and he couldn't stay still. Instead he had to make a risky move north. To me, that's a bit of desperation.

Do you believe that it was Stuart's errors that ultimately cost the battle for the Confederates?

Barry Shollenberger: Stuart's biggest failure was in not supplying Lee with "eyes" on the movements of the Army of the Potomac (from the period June 23-30). Stuart re-defined the role of cavalry in concert with an army in the field. Because he was not with Lee during this period, Lee lost one of his most valuable and trusted aides and his ability to *choose the battlefield*. As we know today, that battlefield was "chosen" pretty much accidentally by Heth and Buford.

Dana Shoaf: It's going too far to lay all the blame on Stuart. But his lack of communication sure didn't help things.

I recently read Tom Carhart, Lost Triumph, Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg-and Why It Failed. I'm curious to hear your thoughts on Carhart's theory on Stuart's position to the east. As well as his theory on Lee's three way attack plan with using Stuart attacking the rear of the Union line and Pickett's frontal attack and Ewell's attack on Culp's Hill.

Barry Shollenberger: You must have a very perceptive professor if you have been guided to read Carhart's book. Most students of Gettysburg already accept the "three-prong" attack that Lee had in mind for Day #3. Mr. Carhart takes it one step further by incorporating Stuart's 6,000 (mostly un-used) troopers into the overall plan of joining Pickett's infantry at the "copse of trees" along Cemetery Ridge.

Meade's foreign birth disqualified him to be President? Weren't his parents American, and thus he an American at birth, even if in Spain?

Barry Shollenberger: The law was (and still is) that a candidate for the Presidency of the United States must be *born* in the United States.

I agree about that Gettysburg is not the end for Lee, as the Overland Campaign, especially around the North Anna River, when Grant almost went into a V-shaped trap which could have destroyed or mauled most of his army, but it did have an influence on Lee's offensive/defensive strategies?

Dana Shoaf: U.S. Grant and George Meade had the most influence on Lee's ability to launch an offensive in 1864. By keeping constant pressure on Lee, they forced him to react to them, and not the other way around. You are correct about that incident on the North Anna. That was a great chance for Lee to hammer Grant. But—Lee was really sick that day, and his subordinates failed to spring the trap.

Do you think the main reason Lee went north was to draw out AOP and destroy it?

Dana Shoaf: That was one of his reasons. Hard to say it was the main one.

Why did Lee wear Colonial Stars instead of General rank?

Dana Shoaf: I believe it was because that was his rank in the U.S. Army before the war. The story goes that Lee would only agree to wear general's insignia if the Confederacy became its own nation and won the war.

Was the 7th Tennessee the Regiment sent into Gettysburg by Heth?

Dana Shoaf: Archer's Brigade of Heth's Division led the Rebel advance to Gettysburg on July 1. That brigade consisted of the the 1st, 7th, and 14th Tennessee Regiments, the 13th Alabama, and the 5th Alabama Battalion.

Was Stewart supposed to break the Union lines from the rear near the Baltimore Turnpike?

Dana Shoaf: That was part of the plan, yes.

Is there any documented proof that the Army of Northern Virginia was headed to Harrisburg?

Barry Shollenberger: Interesting that Lee (in April 1863 – well before Chancellorsville) had Stonewall Jackson's excellent cartographer, Jedediah Hotchkiss, create a map of the upper Valley, south central Pennsylvania, and the route to the railroad bridge over the Susquehanna River at Harrisburg.

How much merit does the "Lost Cause" vilification of Longstreet over the defeat at Gettysburg have? A great deal, I think. The Lost Causers looked for scapegoats and found them in Longstreet and Ewell. If Lee's get credit for victories like 2nd Manassas, Chancellorsville, etc., shouldn't he bear his share of the blame for defeats?

Barry Shollenberger: Of course, Ewell was a Virginian and Longstreet was not and Longstreet joined the Radical Republicans after the war.

Is there any evidence that the Cashtown Hotel was used as a Headquarters to the Confederate Army prior to and during the Battle of Gettysburg?

Dana Shoaf: The Cashtown Inn saw a lot of activity during the advance to Gettysburg and the retreat. I'm sure some officers consulted there during the campaign.

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