

# VICTOR OF GETTYSBURG

George Gordon Meade, America's most underrated General.

BY RALPH PETERS

**M**AJOR GENERAL GEORGE GORDON MEADE decisively won the greatest battle fought in the Western Hemisphere. If any general in blue may be credited with saving the Union at a crucial point, it was Meade. Thrust into the command of a scattered army a mere three days before a fateful battle, he grasped the reins and made one correct decision after another while his storied opponent, Robert E. Lee, lost control of his own army and blundered catastrophically. Meade's contemporaries recognized his achievement.

We dismiss him.

Meade's star went into eclipse for several reasons, none to do with his qualities as a general. Southern commentators could not accept that Meade had defeated their war-god in a fair fight. Meade's no-nonsense character alienated mediocre officers. The troops he commanded valued his reluctance to squander their lives, but Meade refused to play politics and partisan members of Congress connived against him. A brusque professional, Meade wouldn't pander to newspapermen, and the scribblers took their revenge.

Meade also had the misfortune to die soon after the war, in 1872, worn out by campaigning and unable to defeat pneumonia. His detractors from the camp of political generals – Daniel Sickles, Daniel Butterfield, Joseph Hooker, Benjamin Butler and their ilk – were left free to claw at the reputation of a soldier whose achievements dwarfed their own. Sickles, who had almost brought the Army of the Potomac to disaster at Gettysburg, outlived them all – he died in 1914 – and spent five decades insisting that Meade was a cowardly fool and that he, Sickles, was the Union's loyal savior.

More recently, popular novels and films carelessly embraced the line that Meade was a nonentity, portraying his subordinates – most notably Winfield Scott Hancock – as the true architects of victory at Gettysburg. Ignoring the factual record, these entertainments further harmed the reputation of a masterly soldier. In reality, Meade ranked alongside Grant and Sherman in his understanding of how warfare had changed. And Meade had a better grasp of combined arms and the need for an expert staff than either of those titans (it may not be inspiring to Civil War buffs, but a case can be made that the key “combat multiplier” Meade wielded at Gettysburg was superior staff work).

Can this giant whose funeral drew President Grant,

General Sherman, a host of other senior officers, thousands of veterans and hundreds of thousands of grieving civilians be resurrected, at least in reputation?

Begin with his life prior to those fateful days in July 1863. Meade was born on New Year's Eve, 1815, in Cadiz, Spain. His father was a Philadelphia trader who loaned his fortune to the Spanish resistance against Napoleon. With Bourbon rule restored, Richard Meade made the mistake of asking for repayment and found himself locked in a dungeon. Released in the wake of a treaty between Washington and Madrid, he came home a bankrupt and spent the brief remainder of his life attempting without success to reclaim his fortune.

So George Gordon Meade grew up in a family with great prestige, but empty pockets. His widowed mother saw West Point as a cheap path to a higher education, but never dreamed that her son would pursue a career in uniform. Nor did Meade at first. Later, he would take a deep interest in military studies, but he was a middling student at the Academy and, after a mandatory year's service that took him to Florida during the Seminole War, he resigned his commission. An interest in engineering led Meade to work for the Topographical Bureau of the Engineer Corps as a civilian, though, and he would reclaim his commission again – with the loss of six years' seniority.

As tensions rose between the United States and Mexico, the newly remade second lieutenant was assigned to Zachary Taylor's tiny army in southern Texas. Meade wasn't the senior staff engineer, but a succession of superiors fell by the wayside from illness and accidents – until it became a joke among Meade's peers. General Taylor relied upon the tall, stern Philadelphian with an eye for terrain, and Meade began to idolize Taylor.

Reinforced with hard-to-manage volunteers, the army



**Gen. George G. Meade won a decisive victory at the Battle of Gettysburg, saving the Union at a critical point in the Civil War. But his refusal to play politics and his unwillingness to satisfy wartime reporters left him overshadowed by his contemporaries in the annals of history.**





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marched into Mexico. As Taylor's favorite scout, Meade led the way in key attacks. He did not command, but learned the criticality of solid staff work, as an army lacking expeditionary means struggled to keep men equipped, fed and fit to fight in hostile territory. He also learned that dealing with Regulars and coping with citizen-soldiers were very different matters.

Transferred to General Winfield Scott's command, Meade's status was eclipsed by privileged favorites – most notably, the dashing Captain Robert E. Lee. Instead of marching up to Mexico City in Scott's breathtaking campaign (which would shape Grant's Vicksburg Campaign, as well as Sherman's March to the Sea), Meade was sent home, unneeded. As a soldier, he was disappointed. As a man, he was glad to see his growing family again.

With the war behind him, Meade returned to engineering work: Surveys, mapping and pioneering techniques for constructing lighthouses. In the long decade of the 1850s, Meade came to believe that his lighthouses, as well as a breakthrough method of measuring longitude, would be his legacy.

Then the country tore itself apart.

Never a political insider, Meade initially lagged in the early Civil War rush for rank. Only his wife's family connections got him a brigadier's star. Yet, as his fellow officers failed right and left, the be-

spectacled engineer emerged as a fighter. Wounded at Glendale on the Peninsula Campaign (March-July 1862), he returned to duty for Second Bull Run (August 28-30, 1862), then led the 3d Division of "Fighting Joe" Hooker's I Corps at Antietam (September 17, 1862). As senior officers fell to Confederate bullets, Meade took command of I Corps at a critical point – and held together General George B. McClellan's confused efforts on the right flank.

Three months later, in the Union debacle at Fredericksburg (December 11-15, 1862), Meade was the only division commander to break through Lee's defenses. In contrast to the grisly failure in front of Marye's Heights, Meade punched through D.H. Hill's division of Stonewall Jackson's corps, capturing regimental flags and 300 prisoners. But orders and the chain of command were muddled and no one supported him. Even his old friend John Reynolds – now his corps commander – failed to reinforce Meade's men. Galloping about, Meade pleaded with his fellow division commanders and adjacent corps for help. Meanwhile, three of Jackson's brigades moved up to repair the punctured Confederate line. By the time two Union brigades grudgingly inched forward, Meade's embattled soldiers had lost the high ground. Meade raged at Reynolds. Relations between the two would be cool for months.

Meade at least had the satisfaction of seeing his fighting skills rec-



## troy reputations.

ognized. Early in the new year, 1863, he was given V Corps. And he had learned much about high command in bleak 1862. One general after another had failed to maintain control of the army, leaving entire corps idle when reinforcements were needed, or had come to grief by concocting plans too complex to carry out. Cavalry was poorly used, reconnaissance weak and artillery uncoordinated. Written orders were vague, and army commanders were mesmerized by one narrow piece of the battlefield – while events elsewhere forced the outcome. Bold moves collapsed in premature panic. Road movements were poorly planned and logistics priorities confused. Division and corps commanders seemed to fight different battles. In an age of rifled weapons, railroads and the telegraph, too many officers remained enraptured by Napoleonic warfare.

At Chancellorsville (April 30-May 6, 1863), Meade would see almost all of these failings collide in a single disaster.

Succeeding Ambrose Burnside as commander of the Army of the Potomac, Joseph Hooker talked a good game. Meade's initial impression was that the army might have a winning general at last. Designated to lead Hooker's sweep across the Rappahannock River to turn Lee's left, Meade's V Corps caught the Confederates unawares and seized key high ground on the eastern side of what would become the Chancellorsville battlefield.

**July 1, 1863. Soldiers of the 2d Wisconsin rush to assault Confederate Maj. Gen. James J. Archer's brigade and capture what Union Maj. Gen. John F. Reynolds referred to as "the chosen ground" during the Battle of Gettysburg. (Painting *The Chosen Ground* by Keith Rocco.)**

Before one shot had been fired, Hooker grew fearful. Worried that his lead corps had advanced too swiftly, he ordered Meade to withdraw from his forward positions. Infuriated, Meade did as he was told, only to see Lee's men occupy the heights. Held back as Stonewall Jackson executed his fabled flank march, Meade then had to watch as the army's right wing collapsed. On the battle's second morning, with the Confederates in disarray after their success, the still-mighty Army of the Potomac had a chance to reverse the outcome. Meade wanted to attack. But Hooker only wanted to save his army – a force that had remained largely unengaged. Another humiliating retreat began.

A month later, Lee moved north.

President Abraham Lincoln was desperate. Hooker had failed miserably, but replacing him in mid-campaign seemed too risky. And none of the abler generals wanted to head the Army of the Potomac, which seemed destined only to destroy reputations.

While Lincoln fretted, Lee marched hard, determined to give Virginia a respite from war and hoping to end the conflict with one decisive battle on northern soil. Hooker got his army headed north at last, but, unsure of Lee's position, he dispersed his corps to cover every possible route to Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia – with the result that he was weak everywhere. Hooker didn't reveal his campaign plan to Washington because, in essence, he had none.

As Lee's army ranged across southern Pennsylvania, Lincoln at last decided to change commanders. In the early morning hours of Sunday, June 28, 1863, Colonel James A. Hardie from the adjutant general's office entered Meade's tent and woke him. Of late, Meade's relations with Hooker had deteriorated and his initial thought was that he was being relieved and brought up on charges.

Instead, the visitor informed Meade that the president ordered him to assume command of the Army of the Potomac, effective immediately. Declining wasn't an option.

Weary and bewildered, Meade replied, "Well, I've been tried and condemned without a hearing, and I suppose I shall have to go to execution."

He had been in command of a corps for less than six months. Now he had to grip a scattered army.

Arriving at General Hooker's Maryland headquarters, Meade faced a grim reality. Hooker had lost his grip, his dispersed corps an invitation to Lee to defeat them in detail. The army's other generals smelled disaster: Meade could not persuade one capable man to serve as his chief of staff, leaving him stuck with Dan Butterfield, a crony and drinking companion of Hooker and Sickles, who nursed a grudge against Meade for getting command of the corps he thought he'd been promised.

The headquarters of the Army of the Potomac did not possess a single useful map of Pennsylvania. No one had expected to campaign there. Lee's three reorganized corps and J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry arm were running wild. And the president wanted action.

Shaking off his mortification, Meade took charge. He directed the army's seven corps to converge by forced marches so that each would be within supporting range of at least two others. Informed that Stuart's horsemen had raided a wagon train in his rear, he refused to overreact and focused the army on Lee. Pushing his own cavalry out in front of the army, he set his best mounted division on a course



**ABOVE:** July 2, 1863. Meade holds a council of war on the second night of the Battle of Gettysburg. (Engraving by James E. Kelly.) **RIGHT:** July 1863. By the end of the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, Meade had finally given the Union Army a much needed victory. However, the state of his men prevented him from counterattacking and destroying Lee's army – a decision for which Meade received much criticism. (Print by L. Prang & Co.)

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## Meade resisted the impulse to “ride to the sound of

that would lead to a crossroads town in Pennsylvania. He reorganized march priorities and route allocations, empowered his technical staff, ordered his engineers to scout the best ground on which to force Lee to fight at a disadvantage – and asked for an emergency shipment of 2,000 pairs of shoes for his troops, many of whom were barefoot.

To his relief, Meade found that his corps commanders obeyed his orders promptly – relieved that he, not they, bore the weight of high command. Initially, he relied heavily on Reynolds to guide his left wing – which was closest to Lee – while he himself organized the army for battle.

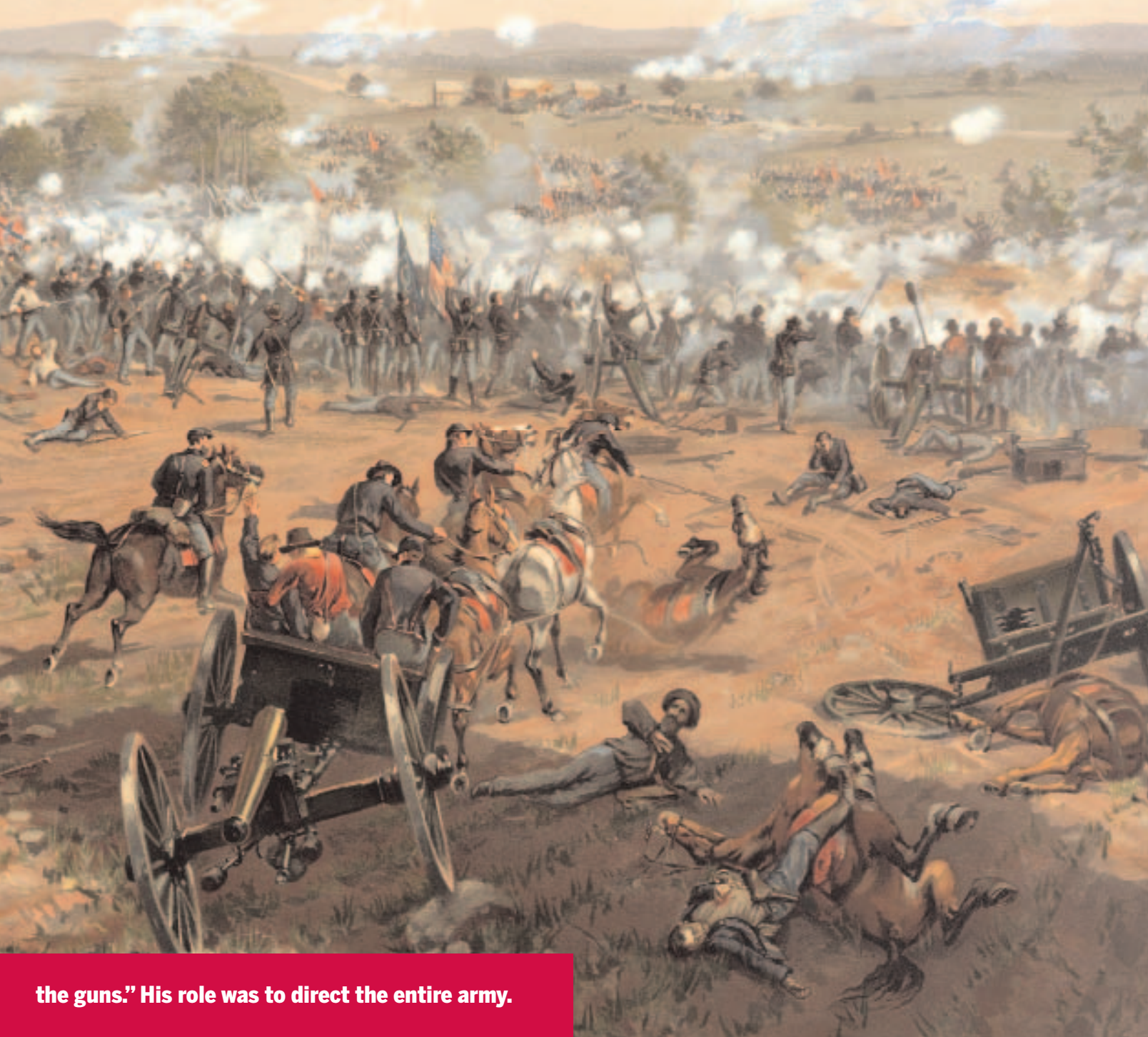
Shifting his headquarters northward to Taneytown, just south of the Pennsylvania line, Meade positioned himself at the army's central point. A hasty survey of the area revealed a strong defensive position along Pipe Creek. Meade decided that, if Lee could be steered toward it, Pipe Creek would be the battleground – yet, he never assumed that Lee would simply do his bidding. Meade remained flexible and so was able to rush two corps to Gettysburg to support Brigadier General John Buford's two brigades of cavalry on the morning of July 1, with additional corps positioned to reinforce them, if required.

Accustomed to Hooker's lackadaisical regime, Butterfield, the chief of staff, was tardy in issuing Meade's "Pipe Creek Circular," which directed the corps to prepare to fight on that line. It was intended for issue on June 30, but Butterfield only got out his couriers early on July 1 – generating brief confusion as orders followed to march hard toward Gettysburg. Meade angrily tightened his grip on the chastened staff – which would perform well in the battle.

The story of the three days of fighting that followed is so well known it need not be retold here, but Meade's superb performance has been ignored. Averaging two hours or less of sleep a night from June 28 through July 3, Meade drove himself remorselessly. On the first day of battle, he resisted the impulse to “ride to the sound of the guns.” His role was to direct the entire army, to maintain his perspective and not become immersed in tactical actions. He remained in Taneytown throughout the day, where corps commanders on the march could reach him, and where he could update their orders from a central lo-

cation. Couriers rode their horses lame and, as soon as it was apparent that the meeting engagement had become a significant fight, Meade ordered more forces into supporting distance.

Unsure if the terrain and conditions at Gettysburg were sufficiently favorable to risk a full-scale battle, Meade kept his options open as long as possible. Despite the alarming early loss of Reynolds and conflicting reports from the field, he remained cool-headed, keeping the army in hand. After Generals Winfield Scott Hancock and Gouverneur K. Warren returned to headquarters to report in person late on July 1, Meade decided it was time to go forward in person. Arriving at Gettysburg around midnight, he listened to the views of corps commanders Oliver O. Howard and Henry W. Slocum, as well as to the opinion of his incomparable chief of artillery, Henry Hunt. Despite his exhaustion – which would only worsen – Meade rode the



**the guns.” His role was to direct the entire army.**

line, inspecting it with an engineer’s eye in the darkness.

After an hour or so of sleep in a chair, Meade rode the position again in the first gray light. The ground was good – if not so formidable as the Pipe Creek line. And battle had been joined. (See *Battle of Gettysburg* map, p. \_\_\_.) Since taking command, he used his special authority to promote the best officers he had to top positions, with no regard for politics or feelings. Early on July 2, the relatively junior John Newton galloped over 20 miles to take command of I Corps from Abner Doubleday, who had held the reins of the corps in the wake of Reynolds’ death. Cavalry captains – among them, George Armstrong Custer – had already found themselves wearing brigadier’s stars at the stroke of a pen. And though Meade always took care of his troops, he decided that all supplies except ammunition had to wait: Men could go hungry for a day or two, but they couldn’t go without bullets or ar-

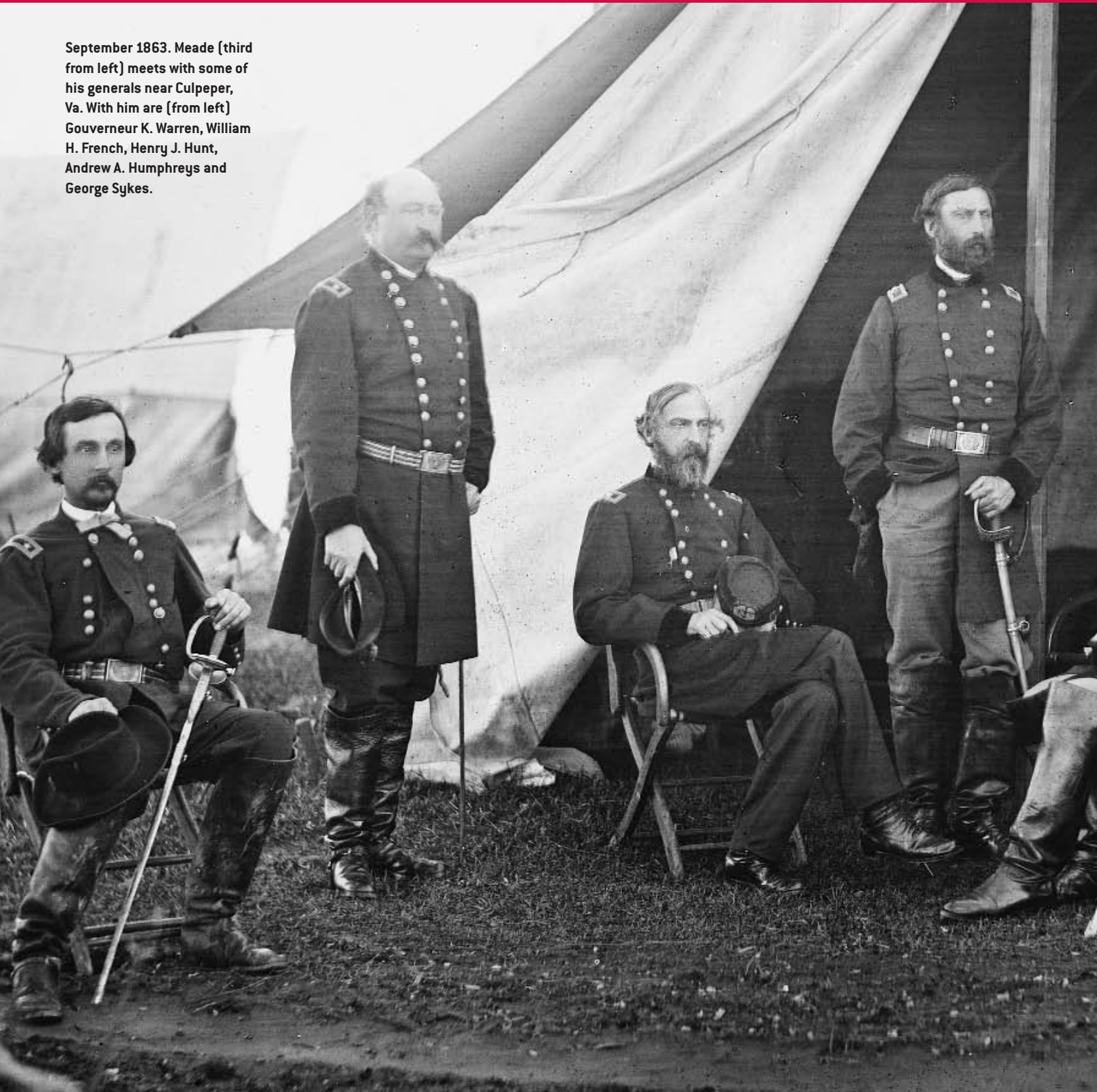
tillery shells in a death-match with the Army of Northern Virginia.

While his messages to Washington made it clear that Meade meant to fight, he recognized that battles don’t always go the way the generals want. Bearing in mind the disordered retreats of the past, he directed his chief of staff to draw up a detailed contingency plan for an orderly withdrawal, just in case. Later, Butterfield, Sickles and their acolytes would lie, claiming the planning proved Meade intended to flee. Such was his reward for thorough professionalism.

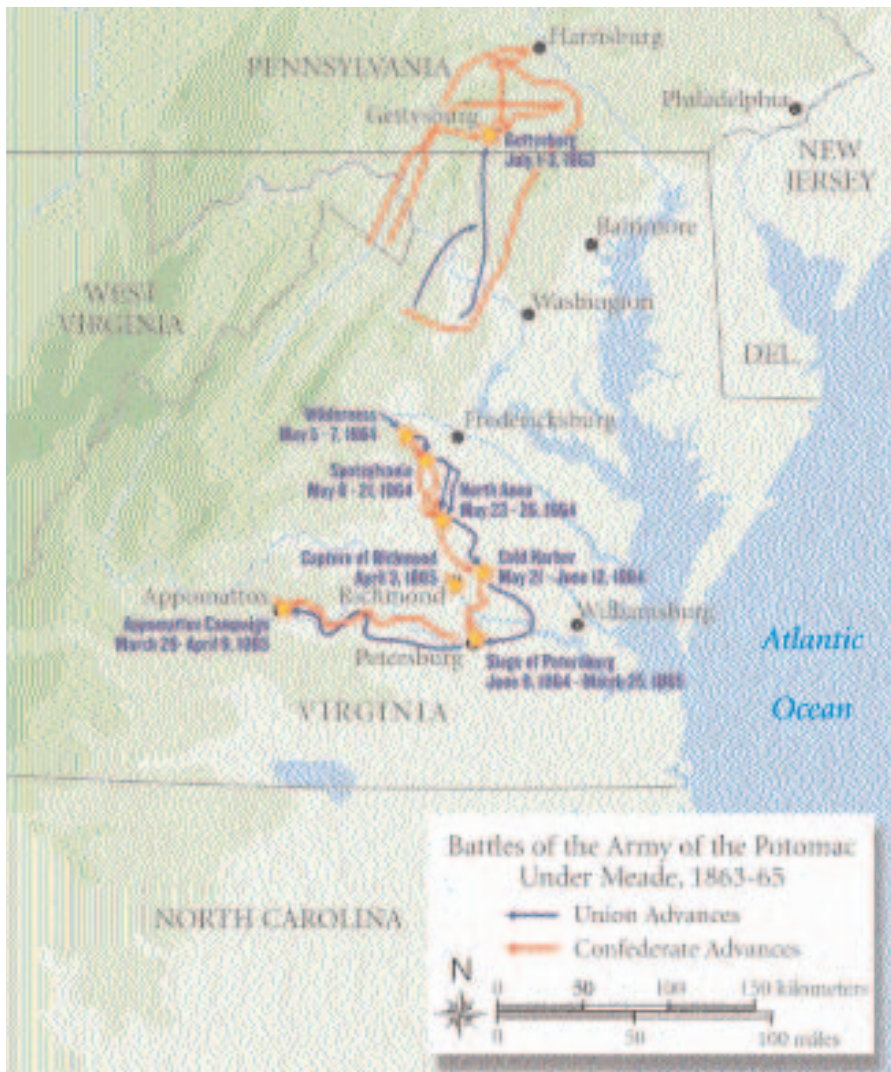
The only mistake – and a costly one – that Meade made on July 2 was his failure to personally inspect the position assigned to Major General Dan Sickles, a “war Democrat” of little military ability, but of great political importance to the president. Sickles’ III Corps was to hold down the left flank, anchoring Meade’s defense at Little Round Top. But Sickles didn’t like the low ground connecting the vital hill

**When Longstreet's two divisions struck, Meade faced his toughest fight – and gave his finest performance**

September 1863. Meade (third from left) meets with some of his generals near Culpeper, Va. With him are (from left) Gouverneur K. Warren, William H. French, Henry J. Hunt, Andrew A. Humphreys and George Sykes.







**LEFT:** On June 28, 1863 – the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg – Meade became the fifth and final commander of the Army of the Potomac, leading it for the remainder of the war. On April 9, 1865, after the bloody 1864 Virginia Campaign and the nine-month siege of Petersburg, Meade’s Army of the Potomac finally triumphed over its archenemy, General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. **OPPOSITE:** June 1865. Meade [center] meets with his corps commanders in the vicinity of Washington, D.C. With him are (from left) Horatio G. Wright, John A. Logan, John G. Parke and Andrew A. Humphreys.

And soldiers in blue came pouring over the ridge. They were led by John Newton, the man Meade had given command of a corps that morning.

Their appearance marked the turning back of the tide for that day, at least. Longstreet halted his weary men, and Hill’s troops, badly bloodied, gave up their gains. As night fell, the Army of the Potomac held the strong line that Sickles had abandoned.

Meade has routinely been criticized for holding a council of war later that evening. But he knew his army and its habit of backbiting after a battle, with various generals claiming that, if only they had been listened to, all would have worked out fine. Meade’s evening message to General-in-Chief Henry Halleck confirmed that he intended to stay and fight on, no matter what the council of war recommended. Yet, the meeting was important on three counts: It forced every senior general to put his cards on the table in front of his peers; it gave all present a personal stake in success, once they voted to

with which Meade moved corps, divisions, brigades and even individual regiments on that field may have amounted to the most effective manipulation of tactical resources by any general on either side in any battle of the war.

Nonetheless, Longstreet’s ferocious attack eliminated III Corps as an effective fighting force for the remainder of the battle and punished V Corps, while a belated attack by A.P. Hill’s troops punched toward the Union center. Despite Meade’s skillful handling of his army, by twilight his luck at last appeared to run out. The final reinforcements Meade had summoned were nowhere to be seen and he found himself in the heart of the battlefield, with only four mounted officers and orderlies beside him. A Confederate brigade appeared through the drifting smoke and dying light, just 600 yards away. They were charging straight for Meade and the gap behind him.

Instead of riding to the rear, Meade stood his ground, determined to fight to the end. As the gray-clad ranks approached, flags waving triumphantly, he looked about desperately, hoping to spot the approach of a blue column. But there was nothing.

Major General George Gordon Meade drew his saber. His subordinates drew theirs.

Just as Meade was about to lead a tiny, forlorn charge, one of his men shouted, “There they come, General!”

stay; and it insured that each corps commander knew precisely what his role would be in the morning – there would be no more Sickles-style shenanigans.

On the battle’s fabled third and final day, confusion in Lee’s army allowed Meade time to bolster his defenses. His chief of artillery, Henry Hunt, gamed the Confederate battle plan with devastating accuracy, positioning his artillery reserve and corps guns with the same effectiveness he’d shown at Malvern Hill in 1862, but on a grander scale. For Meade’s part, he’d noted the night before that he expected Lee to attack his center. He built a defense in depth on Cemetery Ridge. If the Confederates broke through one blue wall, they would only find another.

When the Rebel cannonade announced a grand attack to follow, Meade took his place to the rear of the front line, intending to direct reserves where they were needed and, above all, to maintain control. War had taught him that disorder could be as great an enemy as Lee.

The Rebel gunners shot high, as they often did, largely sparing Meade’s front-line troops, but creating havoc in the rear and driving the army’s headquarters from one site to another, then to a third. At last, Meade could only gallop about, guiding reinforcements.

In the end, they weren’t needed. The Union defense, from artillery fires to infantry volleys, proved so lethal that the Pickett-Pettigrew Charge went down in history only as a glorious defeat. From the first



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cannon shot to the last retreating Confederate firing off a defiant round, the climax of the battle hardly took two hours.

As Meade rode along his lines, the men he had commanded for just six days erupted in cheers. At last, a general had given their army a victory.

But victory had a cost. Meade had contemplated a two-corps counterattack, but he saw the idea was futile. After three days of hard fighting, the Army of the Potomac was stunned by its victory. Officers and men were in shock: They had beaten Lee's best at last! But the army was hungry, battered and, temporarily, disorganized. Men had to be fed, there wasn't enough water for soldiers collapsing in the heat, there were thousands of wounded who had to be gathered and cared for. Caissons were empty and key officers – including Hancock – had been wounded. Those who insisted then and still do now that Meade should immediately have pursued Lee to “destroy his army” couldn't grasp what the Army of the Potomac had endured. Even the bravest flesh and blood has limits.

Unfortunately, President Lincoln was one of those who imagined that Meade had missed a chance to end the war north of the Potomac. The wounded Sickles, who had lost a leg but not his shameless bravado, had himself carried to Washington, where he told Lincoln that *he* had been the true hero of Gettysburg, that Meade was yellow. While the president didn't believe all of Sickles' boasting, he believed enough to misjudge his first winning general in the east.

The Army of Northern Virginia still had plenty of fight left and would have welcomed a chance to fight the Pickett-Pettigrew Charge in reverse. Indeed, when Meade caught up to Lee, just north of the Potomac, he faced daunting entrenchments. And Meade always refused to waste soldiers' lives, if he could help it. He had accomplished his mission: The great northern cities and Washington were safe.

Chastised by Lincoln, Meade offered to resign and the president came to his senses. Nonetheless, Washington interfered inexcusably with Meade's follow-on campaigns, denying him troops and autonomy. Opportunities were squandered, but not by Meade.

When Grant was called east in 1864, the Radicals in Congress and their allied newspapers put it about that he'd soon replace Meade with one of their favored political generals. But Grant knew men. Ignoring complaints from civilian busybodies, he kept Meade in command of the Army of the Potomac to the war's end (Meade was the only commander of that army who wasn't relieved). Although Grant's protégé, Phillip Sheridan – who pandered to the press – would ride on to newspaper glory, it was Meade who fought the battles that drove Lee to Appomattox. (See *Battle of the Army of the Potomac Under Meade map*, p. \_\_\_.) Grant led the campaigns, but Meade applied his army. And when Grant – a strategic and operational genius – meddled in the tactical details, the result was the disaster at Cold Harbor.

In the few years remaining to Meade after Appomattox, he would defuse the Fenian invasion of Canada and administer Reconstruction policies in the south (where the people found him honorable and just) before returning to a department command in Philadelphia. He was revered to the end of his days.

George Gordon Meade never let his countrymen down. But we've failed him. ★

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