

Gettysburg

— some background to the film

THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG was fought over three days, from 1-3 July 1863. At the end of it, combined Union or Federal (northern) and Confederate (southern) casualties exceeded 50 000 men.

By then the civil war had been in progress for more than two years, and was to go on for nearly two years afterwards. However, Gettysburg was a great turning point in favour of the north.

The war was fought in the first instance, not directly to end slavery, but to preserve the Union as a rising continental power against the threat posed by the secession of the southern slave states.¹ The issue of slavery was

central to the secession, but no less central was the deeply-rooted sentiment of southern whites of all classes that their self-determination (“state rights”) should be preserved against the growing domination and arrogance of the economically progressive north.

An industrial revolution was going on, primarily in the north. While manufacturing expanded there, the slave south concentrated even more on growing cotton. At least 80 per cent of the nation’s factories were in the northern states. The 1850s saw a phenomenal expansion of railroad and telegraph networks. The invention and manufacture of agricultural machinery made slavery increasingly outmoded. However, there were also booms and busts, with rising unemployment and barbarous labour conditions for ‘free’ workers. Slavery remained the linchpin of the old, relatively impoverished south, ruled by an oligarchy of plantation-owners. In the north, slavery became a concerted moral issue. In

¹ Karl Marx, writing to Frederick Engels on 1 July 1861, observed: “They [the northern states] cannot, of course, allow the lower reaches and estuary of the Mississippi to pass into the hands of foreign states.”

Chicago, Detroit, Boston and elsewhere, activist crowds menaced federal officers who tried to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law by capturing and returning runaway slaves to their southern owners.

While most southern Democrats and about half of the northern Democrats supported slavery, the makers of the new Republican Party united on the basis that Congress had the right to keep slavery out of the new Territories being opened up in the west under the direct authority of the United States. However: “Few Republicans seem to have had a strong humanitarian interest in the well-being or the future of the Negro. What they most wanted was not freed slaves but free soil; not the advancement of the black, but the welfare of the free white.”²

In the *Dred Scott* case (1857), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld by a majority of six to two the southern contention that Congress had no right under the Constitution to exclude slavery from the Territories.

The election of the Republican (former Whig), Abraham Lincoln, as President of the United States in 1860, precipitated secession by the south. Lincoln’s program regarding slavery was not its abolition but merely the prohibition of its extension to the Territories. For the south, however, the writing was on the wall. Of his 1 866 000 popular votes, Lincoln got only 26 000 in the entire south. This illustrates the extent of the political polarisation of the country.

Still, it should not be forgotten that the civil war was called “the brothers’ war”. Many of the generals and other officers on both sides had been

classmates at the West Point military academy. A number of them had recently fought together in the Mexican War (1846-1848).³

The north and the south should not be viewed as opposing monoliths. It is important to note that the great general of the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee (1807-1870),⁴ was personally opposed to slavery on religious and moral grounds and had opposed secession for practical reasons. In April 1861, by Lincoln’s order, he had been offered command of the whole Union army, but had refused. When, a few days later, his own state of Virginia seceded from the Union, he resigned his commission and returned home, considering that his first duty was to Virginia. At the head of the ‘Army of Northern Virginia’, and by brilliant generalship, he proceeded to inflict a series of defeats on the numerically far stronger Union forces.

The south could not hope to overwhelm and impose itself upon the north. In manpower and materials it was by far the weaker, and this meant that in the long run, if the war could be sustained politically by the north, the south would lose. The military strategy of the Confederacy was therefore aimed at exploiting political divisions within the Union and at bringing about a compromise which would leave the Confederacy in place.

Lincoln was severely hamstrung by

² Hofstadter, Miller and Aaron *The Structure of American History* (1964) p 173.

³ The Mexican War followed the annexation of Texas by the US, and resulted in the further acquisition of 1,300,000 square km of Mexican territory extending westward from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Ocean.

⁴ General Winfield Scott (1786-1866), who was the foremost American military commander between the Revolution and the Civil War, described Lee as “the very best soldier I ever saw in the field.” Engels (letter to Weydemeyer, 24 November 1864) said Lee was “a better general than any the North has”.

the deficiencies of his generals, as well as by political divisions within the north, during the first two years of the civil war. Many of the Union commanders were Democrats harbouring sympathies for slavery, and had no desire in any event to inflict a crushing defeat on the south. They rather sought a compromise, and therefore they temporised, made excuses for failing to attack despite having superior numbers, and failed to pursue tactical advantages when these presented themselves. This, Lincoln understood, would eventually be fatal if it was allowed to go on. He was determined to put an end to the secession at all costs by militarily defeating the south. However, he proceeded initially with great caution towards this goal.

His saw his first task as preventing the border slave states, which had remained in the Union, from joining the Confederacy. Maryland, in the immediate rear of Washington D.C., was itself a slave state. He tried to balance between opposing political forces, while striking hard at direct rebellion. He firmly resisted demands for the emancipation of the slaves, fearing a split that would lead to the victory of the secessionists. At the same time, troublesome state and local authorities, although elected, were simply removed by military force in some areas. *Habeas corpus* was suspended “in the extremest necessity”, and at least 15 000 people were imprisoned in the north, many without trial.

The first commander of the Union’s ‘Army of the Potomac’, General McClellan, was at first very popular and so sure of himself that he could openly refer to Lincoln as a “baboon” and refuse to see the President even when the latter called at his house to discuss the conduct of the war. It was not until November 1862, after numerous

military failures and a debilitating stalemate, that Lincoln felt able to dismiss McClellan. The replacement, General Burnside, was no better. He was furthermore unwilling to lead, and resigned in January 1863. After him came the over-confidant and not very capable General Hooker.

In early May 1863, the Army of the Potomac under Hooker received a bloody reverse at Chancellorsville, near Fredericksburg, which is half way between Washington D.C. and Richmond, the Confederate capital in Virginia. With half the forces of Hooker, Lee had achieved the most brilliant victory of his career. It was because he was so terribly outnumbered that “Lee was free to take preposterous chances; the odds against him were so long to begin with that it could not hurt him to lengthen them a bit”.⁵ Lee had divided his forces, at one point having just 14 000 men to oppose 70 000. By unexpected manoeuvres, and by exploiting his opponent’s mistakes, Lee compelled Hooker to retreat behind the Rappahannock River so as to secure his line of escape. But, while outstanding generalship by Lee had been enough to win the battle of Chancellorsville, it achieved no more than a breathing-space for the Confederacy in the wider war. It was in this context of strategic stalemate that Lee embarked upon his invasion of the north in June 1863.

“Lee had given his own army the habit of victory and he had given the opposing army the habit of defeat; if he now moved to Pennsylvania [i.e. to the north of Washington D.C.] both armies must believe that the great, final showdown was at hand.”⁶ At least he could draw the Army of the Potomac

⁵ Catton *The Centennial History of the Civil War* vol 3 p 150.

⁶ Catton *op cit* p 160.

out of Virginia in order to defend the Union capital; he could gather supplies north of the Potomac and allow Virginia to replenish its home supplies. Most of all, however, if he could force the Army of the Potomac to a decisive battle and defeat it on its own ground, the prospect of forcing a compromise at the negotiating table would open up. The strategic determination of Lee to bring the Army of the Potomac to a decisive battle for this purpose provides the key to understanding his tactical decisions at Gettysburg.

The situation in the north had itself become desperate. The stalemate in the war; the gradual erosion of the northern will to fight; the north's huge losses on the battlefield and the increasing difficulty of replacing them with fresh white volunteers; and, finally, the danger that Britain would recognise the Confederacy — these were the main factors which had led Lincoln towards the end of 1862 to embark upon the revolutionary policy of declaring the slaves of the secessionist states to be free.⁷ The Emancipation Proclamation

⁷ By the middle of 1862, in fact, Lincoln had come to the conclusion that “it was a military necessity ... that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued.”

It is interesting to compare what Engels wrote to Marx in London on 30 July 1862, following reports of a series of military setbacks suffered by the northern forces: “None of this would have signified [disaster], and it might even have been all to the good in as much as the war might at last have been conducted along revolutionary lines. But there's the rub. Defeats don't spur these Yankees on, they just make them flabby. If things have come to such a pass that, to get recruits at all, they say they are prepared to take them for *only 9 months*, then this is tantamount to admitting: ‘We're in the shit and all we want is a make-believe army to do some sabre-rattling during the peace negotiations.’ ... And then, what cowardice on the part of the government and Congress! They shrink from conscription, from resolute fiscal measures, from attacking slavery, from everything that is

was issued on 1 January 1863.⁸ By the time of the battle at Gettysburg in July of that year, ideas of human freedom, equality and the emancipation of the slaves resonated far more within the

urgently necessary; everything's left to amble along at will, and, if some factitious measure finally gets through Congress, the honourable Lincoln hedges it about with so many clauses that it's reduced to nothing at all. It is this flabbiness, this wilting like a pricked balloon under the pressure of defeats, which have destroyed an army, the strongest and the best, and left Washington virtually undefended, it is this complete absence of any resilience among the people at large which proves to me THAT IT IS ALL UP. ... Add to that a complete want of talent. One general more stupid than the other. ... For the South, on the other hand — IT'S NO USE SHUTTING ONE'S EYES TO THE FACT — the affair is a matter of life and death. Our not getting any cotton is one proof of this. The guerrillas in the Border States are another. But, in my view, what clinches the matter is the ability of an agrarian population, after such complete isolation from the rest of the world, to endure such a war and, having suffered severe defeats and the loss of resources, men and territory, nevertheless to emerge victorious and threaten to carry their offensive into the North. On top of that, they are really fighting quite splendidly, and what remained of UNION FEELING, save in the mountain districts, will now, with the re-occupation of Kentucky and Tennessee, undoubtedly evaporate. If they get Missouri, they will also get the TERRITORIES, AND THEN THE NORTH MIGHT AS WELL PACK UP AND GO HOME. ... [U]nless the North instantly adopts a revolutionary stance, it will get the terrible thrashing it deserves — and that's what seems to be happening.”

Marx replied on 7 August 1862: “I don't quite share your views on the AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, I do not believe THAT ALL IS UP. ... In my view, all this is going to TAKE ANOTHER TURN. The North will, at last, wage the war in earnest, have recourse to revolutionary methods and overthrow the supremacy of the BORDER SLAVE STATESMEN.” Marx was right.

⁸ The legal effect of the Proclamation was uncertain — though not its political and practical effect upon the war. The Constitutional Amendment needed to abolish slavery throughout the United States was adopted only in January 1865, while ratification by the States did not take place until after the war.

Union armies than had been the case before.⁹

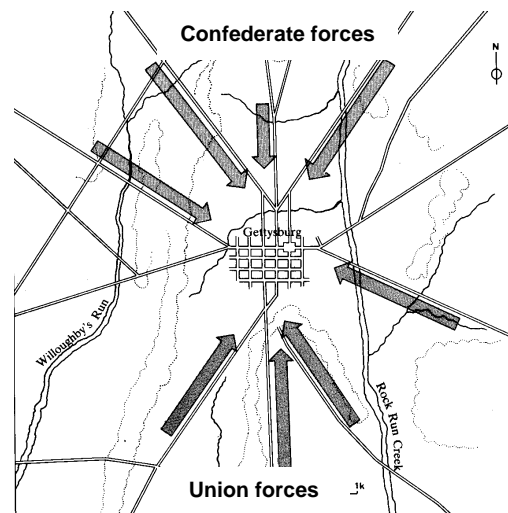


To understand the geography of the battle, one must realise that Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, by racing northward through the Shenandoah Valley,¹⁰ had outflanked the Army of the Potomac, crossed the Potomac north-west of Washington, and was ranging through south-east Pennsylvania, collecting supplies well in the rear of the Union capital. It took Hooker nine days to realise that the Confederate main body had left his front. The Army of the Potomac then rushed northwards to intercept Lee from the south.

On 27 June, Hooker was replaced by General Meade as commander of the Army of the Potomac — a competent soldier who, while cautious, did not scare easily.¹¹

By 28 June 1863, Lee's army was spread out in a crescent of about 60 km north and west of Gettysburg. He was depending on his cavalry corps, commanded by General 'Jeb' Stuart, to keep him informed of the position of the approaching Yankee forces. However, Stuart went off on a frolic of his own, leaving Lee blind. Unbeknown to Lee, the main body of the Union army got closer to him than some of his own units were to each other. When he learned this he reacted at once.

It became urgent to concentrate his forces, and important not to allow battle to begin until that concentration was achieved. Lee had altogether about 75 000 troops. His first aim, let's recall, was not to escape back to Virginia but to smash the Yankee army of about 97 000 in the field. He did not choose Gettysburg as the battlefield: it was chosen rather as the place to concentrate his forces because twelve roads converged there.



⁹ According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "The Emancipation Proclamation did more than lift the war to the level of a crusade for human freedom. It brought some substantial practical results, because it allowed the Union to recruit black soldiers. To this invitation to join the army the blacks responded in considerable numbers, nearly 180,000 of them enlisting during the remainder of the war. By Aug. 26, 1863, Lincoln could report, in a letter to James C. Conkling, that "the emancipation policy, and the use of colored troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion."

¹⁰ It was in the Shenandoah Valley that Confederate General 'Stonewall' Jackson had conducted his legendary manoeuvres in 1862, compelling Union forces to defend Washington instead of reinforcing McClellan's 'Peninsula Campaign' against Richmond.

¹¹ At this time, Grant was still in command of Union forces in the west, and was not involved in the Gettysburg events. In fact it was shortly after Gettysburg that Grant's victory at Vicksburg on the Mississippi brought him to prominence and eventual command of the whole Union army.

Meade, meanwhile, chose a defensive position some 24 km to the south and east of Gettysburg. However, on 1 July 1863, a Union cavalry outpost spotted some Confederate infantry approaching Gettysburg from the west.

"Fortune was, for once, on the Union side, for Brigadier-General John Buford, commander of the 1st Cavalry

Division, was the right man in the right place. A professional soldier, years ahead of his time as far as cavalry tactics were concerned, Buford believed in using horses for mobility, then dismounting troopers and deploying them as infantry. To make his men more effective in this novel role, he armed them with seven-shot Spencer repeating carbines. These ‘horizontal shot towers’ in the hands of four squadrons delayed two Rebel brigades while [Union] reinforcements came up.”¹²

In the film (which was made on location at Gettysburg), Buford is shown as fully appreciating the vital importance of denying to the Confederate forces the advantage of the high ground which lay immediately to the south of the town.

By the time Lee reached Gettysburg in the early afternoon of the first day (1 July), his forces had driven the Yankees off the ridges to the west and north of the town. On the western ridge (‘Seminary Ridge’) stood the Lutheran Seminary, with its cupola affording excellent observation in all directions. This is shown in the film at the time when Buford still held it. Lee’s command post was to be established on Seminary Ridge, looking in an easterly direction down towards Gettysburg — and towards the main arena of battle to the south of the town.

Meade had meanwhile sent General Hancock forward (northward) to assume field command. Hancock had proceeded to form a defensive line on the high ground which begins just south of Gettysburg, with Culp’s Hill and Cemetery Hill, and which stretches southwards from there in a long, low ridge called Cemetery Ridge, down to

two small hills at the southern end called Little Round Top and Big Round Top. The position, which extended for about 4 km from north to south, had good internal lines of communication that would allow Meade and Hancock flexibly to reinforce those places which came under concerted attack. Meade moved his headquarters to a house just behind Cemetery Ridge.

[For a map of the Gettysburg battlefield, see last page.]



On the first day of the battle, the attempt of Lee’s forces to go on and take Cemetery Hill before the Yankees could dig in there was narrowly unsuccessful. General Ewell now commanded the troops once led by ‘Stonewall’ Jackson,¹³ but Ewell (who had lost a leg in an earlier battle and now went around with an infected stump on a wooden peg) lacked his predecessor’s offensive spirit. Lee had asked him to take Cemetery Hill “if practicable”, and he evidently decided it was not. We see the aftermath of this failure in the film. It is not indicated in the film that Lee himself was ill with dysentery at the time.

On the second day, Lee tried to turn the Union flanks on both ends. The assault on the Union right (or northern) flank at Culp’s Hill was led by Ewell and was again unsuccessful. The film concentrates rather on the assault made against the left (or southern) flank of the Union position at Little Round Top. After coming within an inch of success, this attempt by the Confederates also

¹² Macdonald *Great Battlefields of the World* p 92.

¹³ Jackson had been accidentally shot and killed by his own troops near Chancellorsville when he went on a reconnaissance at night without telling them.

failed.

On the third day, Lee attacked the Union centre on Cemetery Ridge. The film provides everything necessary to explain this. Of the 15 000 men who made ‘Pickett’s charge’, 7 000 did not return. Only 150 Confederate infantry, led by General Armistead (who was mortally wounded), managed to penetrate the Union defences.

The historian Catton gives this explanation for why Lee rejected the proposal of his most trusted general, Longstreet, that the Confederate army circle round the Union position to the right (i.e. to the south and east) and get into Meade’s rear rather than attack a well-defended position head-on:

“He [Lee] no longer had Stonewall Jackson, the one man who could have led such a move; furthermore, in Stuart’s absence he did not know just where Meade’s rear was or what he might run into if he tried to go there.”¹⁴

As the film shows, Lee was also concerned about weakening the morale of his troops, who were now concentrated for the long-awaited attack. Moreover, he did not want to run the risk that his line of retreat to Virginia might be sealed off. He saw what Lincoln had seen when he insisted that Hooker leave Richmond and pursue Lee into Pennsylvania:

“He [Lincoln] had grasped a strategic point of importance: when a Confederate army left its own territory and went north it exposed itself to outright destruction. It could be cut off, forced to fight its way out of a trap, and in the end removed from the board; by the mere act of invasion it risked its very existence, and the chief responsibility of the Federal commander was to make sure that what

was risked was lost.”¹⁵

In any event now, out of his 75 000 men at Gettysburg, Lee had lost 27 000 (killed, wounded, captured or missing) whom he could never replace. The Union forces had lost some 23 000. In all, 21 000 wounded were left behind at Gettysburg when the war moved on.

On the fourth day (Independence Day), Lee maintained a defensive position, expecting an inevitable Union attack. It did not come. To Lincoln’s intense frustration, Meade simply stayed in his own position and failed to attack, thus allowing Lee to slip back over the Potomac with the remains of his army and continue the war. It would drag on for another two years.

Gettysburg, however, turned the tide.



On 29 November 1864, Karl Marx in London wrote to a relative:

“When you reflect, my dear Uncle, how at the time of Lincoln’s election 3½ years ago it was only a matter of making *no further concessions* to the slave-owners, whereas now the avowed aim, which has in part already been realised, is the *abolition of slavery*, one has to admit that *never* has such a gigantic revolution occurred with such rapidity. It will have a highly beneficial influence on the whole world.”

A few days earlier, on 24 November 1864, Engels in Manchester had written to Weydemeyer in St. Louis:

“That war of yours over there is really one of the most stupendous things that one can experience. Despite the numerous blunders made by the Northern armies (enough by the South too), the tide of conquest is rolling

¹⁴ *Op cit* p 184.

¹⁵ Catton *op cit* p 164.

slowly but surely onward, and, in the course of 1865, at all events the moment will undoubtedly come when the *organised* resistance of the South will fold up like a pocket-knife.... A people's war of this kind, on both sides, has not taken place since great states have been in existence, and it will, at all events, point the direction for the future of the whole of America for hundreds

of years to come. Once slavery, the greatest shackle on the political and social development of the United States, has been broken, the country is bound to receive an impetus from which it will acquire quite a differed position in world history within the shortest possible time, and a use will then soon be found for the army and navy with which the war is providing it."

