

Gettysburg's “Decisive Battle”

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Our conviction that only a great battle can produce a major decision is founded not on an abstract concept of war alone, but also on experience. . . . All fortunate generals, and not only the bold, the daring, and the stubborn, seek to crown their achievements by risking everything in decisive battles.

—Carl von Clausewitz¹

IN THIS TIME of military innovation and an increasingly complex strategic situation for the United States, many have faith that technology and new frameworks of diplomacy will make the use of U.S. military force short and conclusive. Current joint and Army doctrine cites the need to use force decisively to gain military victory over opposing military forces.² For many, the Persian Gulf war was a new model for battles of annihilation and decisive military engagement. But, what is “decisive battle?” Answering that question could benefit from a historical analysis. One of the most well-known American battles, the Battle of Gettysburg, provides an excellent historical example for studying the link between decisionmaking and the battlefield.

Military historians frequently depict the Battle of Gettysburg as one of the decisive battles that marked a turning point in the American Civil War. Gettysburg was a major and significant battle; over 51,000 casualties during a 3-day period are evidence for this claim. Yet Gettysburg is often described as the battle that doomed the Confederate struggle. On the surface, this is a questionable claim. The war lasted for almost 2 years more. What did the “decisive” Battle of Gettysburg really decide?

Historians and military leaders often use the term decisive battle without defining it, and such definitions as exist fall into one of three categories.³ In the first and most widely accepted definition, a battle is decisive if it achieves operational objectives. Such

a battle differs from a battle that results in only a tactical victory. A decisive battle often results in a military stalemate or a pause before the start of a new campaign.

A second definition states that a battle is decisive only when it ends the conflict by achieving one side’s strategic objectives. These battles often lead to treaties that temporarily settle political differences.

The last and most exclusive definition states that only battles that directly end the conflict and result in a lasting peace between the belligerents are decisive. Few battles in history can claim this distinction.

To judge which definition sets forth the best criteria for the term “decisive battle,” we must resolve the degree of decisiveness required. The magnitude of losses appears to be the sole criteria many popular histories use to identify the most decisive battles of all time. Their authors seem to consider only the largest battles and those in which a tactical defeat was total. The important question of what these “decisive battles” really decided is rarely addressed.

Yet by looking at Gettysburg, the largest of Civil War battles, and the desired outcomes the two opponents sought, a definition for the term “decisive battle” emerges. A truly decisive battle must decide consequences beyond military issues of tactical importance and operational significance. A decisive battle must directly lead to a rapid resolution of the contested political issues because the results on the battlefield caused both sides to agree that a decision had been reached.

The Search for Battle

Civil War political and military leaders believed that decisive battles should be sought and that a conclusive collision of armies was the goal of military operations. They believed this because of their experiences in the Mexican War. They also believed in

Western military tradition. Decision in battle was still possible. It was the goal of generalship after the Wars of Napoleon. Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz said, "Since time began, only great victories have paved the way for great results."⁴ Although he did not define decisiveness in battle, Clausewitz agreed that if military leaders did not seek to decide strategic and operational issues in battle, the very reason for risking engagements would be removed. Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest held this idea when he asked about Braxton Bragg's repeated unwillingness to exploit tactical victory, "What does he fight battles for?"⁵ Experience taught many Civil War leaders that *exploiting* a victory was more difficult but more rewarding than achieving a victory, but many factors, including fatigue and postbattle confusion, often prevented exploitation.

Although popular lore states that this great battle began over a need for shoes, many Civil War historians believe Confederate General Robert E. Lee sought a decisive battle that would end the war.⁶ Over 20 years after the war, Isaac Trimble, a Confederate division commander at Gettysburg, described a conversation with Lee 4 days before the clash at Gettysburg. Trimble heard Lee declare, "I shall throw an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it, follow up the success, drive one corps back upon another, and by successive repulses and surprises . . . create a panic and virtually destroy the army. [Then] the war will be over and we shall achieve the recognition of our independence."⁷

Lee's faith in the Army of Northern Virginia's prowess and in the wisdom of assuming and maintaining the offensive, appears in Lee's correspondence before the campaign. Lee repeatedly said that remaining on the defensive had no promise, and he hoped that a bold move north would gain the greatest advantage for the South.⁸ Believing the Army of the Potomac's defeat was the best chance to advance the Confederate cause and erode Northern

will to continue the fight, Lee moved his army north.

Lee's quest for a decisive battle is apparent in his report to the Confederate War Department after Gettysburg: "[The battle became] unavoidable. Encouraged by the successful issue of the engagement

reasoned that few battles during the American Civil War met Clausewitz's criteria for decisiveness, and fewer still had much effect beyond attrition.¹⁵ This interpretation (with a few significant exceptions) was based on the absence of any form of vigorous pursuit after a battle. Yet, without pursuit, Clausewitz warned, "no victory will be effective," because the magnitude of victory is proportional to the "vigor of the immediate pursuit."¹⁶ Northern reinforcements had continued to arrive at Gettysburg after the repulse of Pickett's attack, and the 3-day battle left entire Union VI Corps undamaged. If these fresh Union formations had either boldly attacked or resolutely chased down the weakened Army of Northern Virginia, Lincoln might have gotten his wish—the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army.¹⁷

But Union formations were not boldly committed, and Lee's army was not destroyed. Lee also would never be able to shatter the Union army. The months following Gettysburg witnessed an operational lull, allowing both sides to recover from the battle. When the armies returned to the often-contested ground in northern Virginia, the strategic status quo was re-established. A larger Army of the Potomac and an entrenched Army of Northern Virginia once again faced each other across the Rappahannock and the Rapidan. Even telegrams between the armies in the field to their presidents bore a striking resemblance to those sent before the campaign.¹⁸ Returning to nearly the same strategic situation is evidence that the Battle of Gettysburg had a limited immediate effect on the course of the war.

But Gettysburg did decide a great many things at the tactical and operational level, and it did end the campaign and establish a victor. Lee's second invasion of the North failed, and Meade accomplished his primary operational goal when the battle forced the Army of Northern Virginia to retreat.¹⁹ The battle proved the mettle of the Army of the Potomac while ruining the vaunted offensive potential of

Lee's army.²⁰ The much-heralded Union victory at Gettysburg led Union soldiers, politicians, and voters to believe that the North was winning the war.

The lengthy casualty lists published in Southern newspapers next to the accounts of the battle eroded Confederate home-front morale. In early

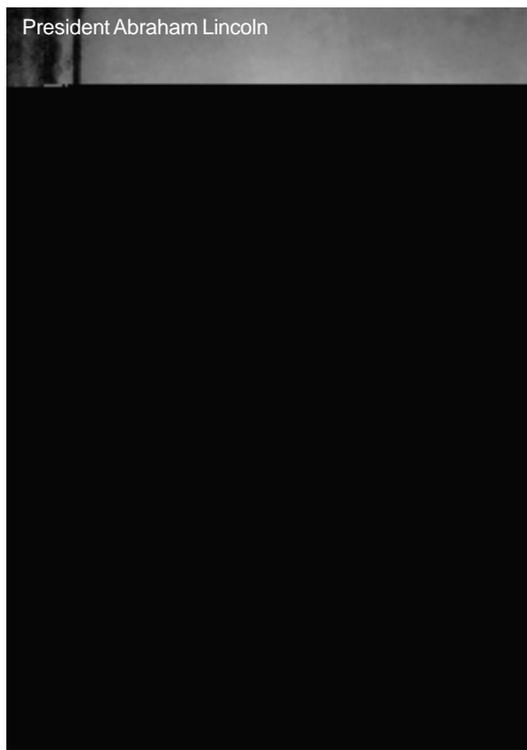
1864, Meade and his officers and soldiers received Congressional resolution thanking them for "the skill and heroic valor which, at Gettysburg, repulsed, defeated, and drove back, broken and dispirited, beyond the Rappahannock, the veteran army of the rebellion."²¹

The Confederate army had also claimed solid accomplishments. Lee believed that he had hurt the Union army in proportion to his own losses. He had cleared the Shenandoah Valley, forced the recall of some Northern forces from coastal areas, and removed the fear of a major Union offensive into Virginia. He believed that he had ended the threat of invasion for the year.²²

Lee was unwilling to admit the campaign was a failure, just as Meade was unable to claim total victory.²³ Both sides' accomplishments were far below expectations and mostly temporary or operational.

The Makings of a Decisive Battle

Although Lee undertook his second invasion of the North for logistical and operational reasons, he hoped for results far greater than relieving Vicksburg or clearing the Shenandoah Valley. He did not seek the Union army's destruction; he sought Union acceptance of Southern demands for independence based on a loss of Union faith in eventual victory, which was the paramount way of achieving strategic objectives using operational and tactical means.²⁴ This outcome might have been an impossibility. Lee was wrong to expect that a decisive Confederate victory at Gettysburg would have enough effect on Northern policymakers and home-front morale to resolve the issue on which the war was waged and to silence the guns.



Matthew Brady Collection, National Archives



Timothy O'Sullivan stereo. National Archives

General Grant bends over a bench to look at General Meade's map during a meeting with his senior commanders near Massaponax Church, Virginia, 21 May 1864.

Even if Lee had succeeded in smashing the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg, the war would not have ended with Southern independence.²⁵ Even if Lee had won another Chancellorsville or Second Manassas in the hills around Gettysburg, victory would not have been a fatal blow to the Union. Vicksburg would still have fallen, and the Confederacy would still have been split in half.

Union replacements and materiel were plentiful, and entire Union armies were undefeated in the field. The idea that a Union defeat at Gettysburg would cripple the Union war effort ignored the North's demonstrated ability to overcome defeat and disaster. The loss of over half of the Army of the Potomac (Lee's best-case scenario) would have no more crippled the Union army than equivalent losses did in May-June 1864. Inflicting such a loss on the Union army would still have come at a high cost to Southern military resources. But the North's warfighting

means were not Lee's target. His hopes for victory rested on destroying the Union's will.²⁶

Lee's hypothesis of how the South could win decisively at Gettysburg reveals a critical link between conflict decision, battle, and war termination. Both sides would have had to acknowledge that a decisive battle had occurred, settling the contested political issues before hostilities ended.

Likely, little mutual agreement would have resulted from any potential Confederate accomplishments at Gettysburg. The introduction of mass-conscripted, Industrial-Age armies limited the potential to decisively cripple an opponent's warfighting means because most Western nations could recover from a battlefield disaster. Adopting radical war aims eliminated any chance of a single defeat having a decisive effect on the opponent's will to continue the struggle. A Confederate victory at Gettysburg would not have ended the Civil War

because the Confederacy sought a fundamental change in the balance of power in North America and the continuance of the “particular institution.”²⁷ No single battlefield loss would have made this acceptable to the Northern public.

Yet, one can cite this same logic to argue against the possibility of a decisive Union triumph. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union’s strategic goals were too comprehensive and inflexible to be thwarted by a single defeat.

The destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia might not have ended the war as Lincoln hoped, but shattering that army and capturing Lee would have had an effect on Confederate home-front morale and policymakers in Richmond. The growing rigidity of war aims and a reluctance to accept the unacceptable dominated war efforts and strategies of both opponents. Irreconcilable war aims severely limited the effect a single battle could have had.

Nevertheless, a battlefield disaster can become decisive in the long run through its effect on policymakers and home-front morale regardless of a society’s ability to replace the loss in combat power. A battlefield disaster can spark a perception that the war effort has failed and further defeats are inevitable. As Baron Antoine Jomini stated, “The results of a battle generally depend upon a union of causes which are not always within the scope of the military act . . . , but it is the *morale* of armies, as well as of nations, more than anything else, which makes victories and their results decisive.”²⁸ The physical effects of defeat on military forces are not what makes a battle decisive; it is the psychological effect on confidence in eventual victory that determines the significance of a battlefield defeat.

After the battle, Davis sought to explain the effects of Gettysburg: “The drooping spirit of the North was revived, [and Lee’s failure] impaired the confidence of the Southern People, [making Gettysburg] the most eventful struggle of the war [because in] all free governments, the ability of its executive branch to prosecute a war must largely depend on public opinion; in an infant republic, this, for every reason, is particularly the case. The volume given to the voice of dissatisfaction was therefore most seriously felt by [the Confederacy].”²⁹

Davis’s contention conveys the idea of a conflict’s turning point—the psychological outlook that occurs when one or both sides believe a corner has been turned and that one side’s fate has crystallized. This perception might be apparent at the time or might only emerge later as the conflict drags on.

Success cannot be measured in the number of

casualties or loss of equipment alone. Clausewitz affirms that the “decision that is brought about by the battle partly depends on the battle itself—its scale, and the size of the forces involved—and partly on the magnitude of the success.”³⁰

Many historians look to the Confederate Army on the evening of 3 July to see how even the loss of over one-third of those engaged can still be overcome. Many Confederates were neither demoralized nor cowed by the repulse of Pickett’s charge. They were enraged by what they had seen and stood eager for revenge. They longed for a Union assault so they could treat the enemy in the same way they had been treated. After the third bloody day at Gettysburg, one man proclaimed, “We’ll fight them, sir, till hell freezes over, and then, sir, we will fight them on the ice.”³¹

Lee explained why Confederate soldiers were willing to fight: “[On the Confederate soldier’s] courage and fidelity depends all that makes life worth having—the freedom of his country, the honor of his people, and the security of his home.”³² Nearly crippled by losses and with significantly diminished combat power, the Army of Northern Virginia was not a demoralized, defeated army in its own heart and mind, which indicates that a decisive battle victory cannot be measured in the physical damage done to the defeated force. The will to fight is paramount. Perhaps those soldiers in blue and gray would have been willing to continue the bloodshed on 4 July, regardless of losses, solely because they had a strong belief in their causes.

Was Gettysburg a decisive battle? War aims and their influence on policymakers and military forces must also be considered. Given human nature, this makes sense; for if a belligerent wages a total war for what he believes to be his survival, why would a single defeat, regardless of the magnitude, stop his struggle while he possesses the means to continue the conflict? The target then for decision on the modern battlefield might be the enemy’s will to continue the struggle, rather than his means to do so. Was Gettysburg a decisive battle? Regardless of the battle’s scale, magnitude, and casualties, neither side achieved all it set out to do.

Expenditure of Effort

Clausewitz said, “The smaller the penalty you demand from your opponent, the less you can expect him to try and deny it to you; the smaller the effort he makes, the less you need to make yourself. [Once the enemy’s] expenditure of effort exceeds the value of [his] political objective, the objective must

be renounced.”³³ The Battle of Gettysburg shows that military actions, war aims, and conflict resolution are too complex for simple explanations. Yet, to understand Gettysburg or to plan a future decisive campaign or battle, military commanders must work to establish the link between the battlefield and the decision. Decisive battle, once defined, helps explain the tortuous path from the battlefield to the negotiating table, and from the battle’s effect on homefront morale to the decisions made by policy makers. This can present a framework within which to analyze a battle’s effect. What did the battle decide at each level of the conflict?³⁴

A decisive battle might no longer be possible now that heads of state and their fates are only indirectly tied to the battlefield. This is not meant to be deterministic; all engagements still influence and shape the overall conflict, but most fail to decide a war’s outcome. During the American Civil War, entire campaigns were necessary to inflict enough military ruin to coerce an enemy to accept terms of surrender. It took a combination of Sherman’s March to the Sea and Grant’s 1864 campaign to convince Con-

federate leaders that continuing the military struggle was futile. The claim that Gettysburg was a decisive battle must be considered in context. Arguing that a single battle or even a single campaign inside one theater can decide a conflict is questionable amid the actions that occurred during the 4-year war across a 1,000-mile front.

A single campaign might only be decisive if it is aimed to decide limited goals; a total war with radical objectives might require numerous campaigns to cripple an enemy enough that he sues for peace.

In the end, Clausewitz was right: war is truly an extension of politics by other means. He warns, “There is no factor in war that rivals the battle in importance, and the greatest strategic skill will be displayed in creating the right conditions for [the battle], choosing the right place, time and line of advance, and *making the fullest use of the results* (emphasis added).”³⁵ This did not happen after Gettysburg. For all that was decided and accomplished, the Battle of Gettysburg fails to earn the label “decisive battle.” **MR**

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 260.
2. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], June 2000), 11-12, repeatedly refers to decisive operations and decisive speed. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 14 June 2001), 1-4, talks about the need to achieve an acceptable strategic end state: “It is the Army’s ability to react promptly and to conduct sustained land operations that make it [combat] *decisive*” (emphasis in original). All recent versions of FM 100-5 stress this need for decisiveness with little clarification of what that entails.
3. “Decisive battle” has a well-established place in the lexicon of military history. Sir Edward Creasy is most likely responsible for the popularity of the term, based on the favorable reception of his book, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1851). Creasy recounted the 15 battles that met these criteria, highlighting the battles and their far-reaching effects.
4. Clausewitz, 260. Sentiments similar to those of Clausewitz are in Henry W. Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1846), which is one of the few influential books on military theory that was available in Antebellum America.
5. In this case, Nathan Bedford Forrest was referring to the failure to pursue after Chickamauga. See Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 142.
6. For more on this story, see on-line at <www.swcivilwar.com/LeeLetterMarylandInvasion.html>, accessed 14 May 2004.
7. Isaac Trimble gave this “almost verbatim” account from memory, claiming he distinctly remembered Lee’s words and intent. See Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1987).
8. Official Record (OR), Series (Ser.) 1, Volume (Vol.) XXVII, Part (Pt.) 3, 868-69. *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1880-1901).
9. OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, 308.
10. *Ibid.*, 301.
11. The quest to make battle decisive permeated the soldiers and leaders of both sides. Contemporary accounts are filled with expectations that the coming battle would be great and that the fate of the two opposing nations would rest on the outcome. The best books highlighting the desires and actions of both sides are Harry W. Pfanz, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National Park and Monument Association, 1994) and Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997).
12. *Ibid.*, 82.
13. Lincoln was dejected when he learned that Lee’s army had reached the safety of Virginian soil after the battle at Gettysburg. Lincoln penned a harsh letter to Meade, which he never actually sent. See Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 216.
14. T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and his Generals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952),

- 265-68.
15. Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway William N. Still, Jr., and Archer Jones, *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 177.
16. Clausewitz, 261. The cause for the absence of large bodies of cavalry conducting a close pursuit during the Civil War was somewhat influenced by terrain, military tradition, and demographics, but the introduction of the rifled musket, which enabled small bodies of infantry, even in retreat, to stop cavalry charges with firepower was the real cause.
17. OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, 82-83. Lee’s withdrawal on 4 July did not end the opportunity for the Union to destroy the Confederate army. Halleck’s order to Meade on 7 July clearly relayed Lincoln’s desire: “You have given the enemy a stunning blow at Gettysburg. Follow it up, and give him another before he can reach the Potomac.”
18. Meade’s telegraphs and reports during the indecisive maneuvering of the late summer and fall of 1863 sounded like echoes of former commanders of the Army of the Potomac. See OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXIX, Pt. 2, 201-202, 361-62, and 375-76. For a sample of Lee’s communications after the battle, see OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, 302-304.
19. See OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, 114-19, for Meade’s official report of the battle at Gettysburg.
20. Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 118.
21. OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 3, 857.
22. *Ibid.*, Pt. 2, 302.
23. Freeman, III, 154. See OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, 305-11 for Lee’s official report of the Gettysburg Campaign.
24. Clausewitz, 265.
25. See Beringer, Hattaway, Still, and Jones for a discussion of whether a Confederate decisive victory was impossible.
26. See OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 3, 880-82.
27. Beringer, Hattaway, Still, and Jones, 420.
28. Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1862), 162.
29. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 448-49.
30. Clausewitz, 261.
31. Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 412.
32. OR, Ser. 1, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, 301.
33. Clausewitz, 81-92.
34. Creasy, ix. To maintain an operational significance for decisive battle, its definition must not be too narrow, such as Creasy’s requirement that the battle’s effects “sway the fortunes of successive generations of mankind.” Applying broad criteria would render the term meaningless.
35. Clausewitz, 261.

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