

# ***Moments in Leadership***

## **January 2015: Leading Change** *by Paul Marcone*

The federal Office of Personnel Management has identified five executive core qualifications (ECQs). The first of these is [\*Leading Change\*](#). OPM, in defining this ECQ, notes that an inherent part of *Leading Change* “...is the ability to establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment.”

I'd like to focus in this article on the performance of Confederate General Lafayette McLaws during the Maryland Campaign of 1862 and how he exemplified the best qualities of OPM's *Leading Change*. The campaign culminated in the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862 – the bloodiest day in American military history. And, if not for the efforts of one Lafayette McLaws, the Battle of Antietam likely would never have occurred.

The Maryland Campaign began in early September of 1862 when the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, led by General Robert E. Lee, crossed the Potomac and invaded Maryland. Lee's army was flush with victories on the Peninsula outside of Richmond, VA and, most recently, on the plains of Manassas. Lee was aiming for a knockout blow to end the war. Such a victory on Northern soil would likely bring Great Britain and France into the war on the side of the South.

One of the keys to Lee's strategy was capturing the federal outpost at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). The Union garrison at Harper's Ferry lay dangerously close to Lee's tenuous supply line. It had to be neutralized for Lee's invasion of the North to succeed. Lee assigned three wings of his army to take Harper's Ferry. The wings were commanded by Generals Stonewall Jackson, John Walker and Lafayette McLaws.



Lafayette McLaws, a native Georgian, was 41 years old in September 1862. The West Point graduate (class of 1842) had spent his entire pre-war career in the U.S. Army serving solidly but unspectacularly. When the Civil War started, he resigned his commission and volunteered his services to the state of Georgia. His solid performance on the battlefield led to steady promotion in the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. On the eve of the Maryland Campaign McLaws was a Major General in command of a division.

Lee's orders directed McLaws to take his 4,400 men and hold Maryland Heights – which commanded Harper's Ferry. From that position, McLaws was to bombard the Union garrison in Harper's Ferry and, at the same time, prevent any Union reinforcements from reaching the garrison via the Pleasant Valley. Stonewall Jackson's contingent was to attack Harper's Ferry from the west; while Walker's division took Loudon Heights and bombarded the garrison from the Virginia side of the Shenandoah (Harper's Ferry is situated at the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers).

As the maneuvering unfolded, McLaws performed brilliantly. Despite the rough terrain, his men captured Maryland Heights and manhandled several artillery pieces into position to bombard the town. At the same time, McLaws divided his forces to hold off some 16,000 Union troops in the Pleasant Valley attempting to relieve Harper's Ferry. By midday on September 15<sup>th</sup> the Union garrison in Harper's Ferry had surrendered. But Stonewall Jackson needed time to process the 10,000 prisoners he had captured as well as the enormous stores of supplies that had been captured.

Not realizing the fact that McLaws was facing down 16,000 men in Pleasant Valley, Lee had ordered McLaws to cross the Potomac at Harper's Ferry and join Jackson, then march north to rejoin Lee's army which had taken up a defensive position 14 miles north on the west bank of Antietam Creek. If McLaws obeyed those orders, the large force in Pleasant Valley would have been free to swoop in and sever Lee's supply line – forcing Lee to end his invasion of the North.

McLaws took matters into his own hand and decided to directly confront the 16,000 Union troops in Pleasant Valley. Using the terrain to his advantage, McLaws boldly marched his men into the Valley and maneuvered them into position as if he planned to attack. The ruse worked and it stopped the Union commander in Pleasant Valley, William Franklin, dead in his tracks.

In his epic work, *To Antietam Creek*, historian Scott Hartwig noted that:

*McLaws's dispositions must have been remarkably clever to make his 4,400 infantry look like 25,000-30,000 men. Without firing a shot or shedding a drop of blood – with mere bluff, pluck, and nerves – Lafayette McLaws had mentally whipped William Franklin, rendering Franklin's powerful force of 16,000 men as potent as so many campers in Pleasant Valley . . . had McLaws lost his nerve, or obeyed Lee's initial orders . . . there surely would have been no Battle of Antietam.*

Let's look at McLaws and his performance in terms of *Leading Change*. OPM lists six key traits for Leading Change: creativity and innovation; external awareness; flexibility; resilience; strategic thinking; and vision. McLaws displayed all six traits during the Maryland Campaign.

- 1) He was **creative** in finding a way to haul artillery up Maryland Heights (if you've ever been to Maryland Heights you will scratch your head and wonder how he pulled it off). McLaws didn't let the daunting terrain deter him from successfully assaulting the position. And he boldly maneuvered his forces in the Pleasant Valley – tricking his opponent into thinking that he had six to seven times the number of troops he actually had!
- 2) McLaws was well **aware** of the important role he had in Lee's plan – both the plan to take Harper's Ferry and the large plan to invade the north and keep the war out of Virginia for several weeks.
- 3) In a very fluid situation, McLaws was **flexible** in deploying his forces and responding to new intelligence. He didn't panic when he learned that an overwhelming force of the enemy had burst into his rear. He simply redeployed his forces and calmly worked on a plan to meet this new threat and still accomplish his mission.
- 4) OPM defines **resilience** as the ability to “deal effectively with pressure; remain optimistic and persistent, even under adversity.” This certainly describes McLaws in Pleasant Valley. McLaws was in an isolated position and outnumbered 4 to 1. Yet he kept his cool. His mental toughness, as Hartwig noted, resulted in the mental breakdown of his opponent, William Franklin.
- 5) McLaws always kept his eye on the prize – employing **strategic thinking** throughout the campaign. McLaws was able to see the big picture. This allowed him to disobey Lee's orders because he saw strategically the importance of preventing Franklin's force from falling on Lee's supply line. Again, McLaws not only saw the big picture, but acted in a manner consistent with his commanding officer's **strategic thinking**.

- 6) McLaws was able to get his subordinates to translate his strategic **vision** (and that of Lee) into concrete action – namely securing Maryland Heights, bombarding Harper’s Ferry and confronting a large force of the enemy and neutralizing that force. No small task.

If you are a leader being tasked with leading an organization through a period of significant change and turmoil, keep in mind Lafayette McLaws and the challenges he faced in September Of 1862. Creativity, external awareness, flexibility, resilience, strategic thinking and vision are central characteristics of the successful leader.

Are you embracing these traits?

*For information on how your organization can learn the leadership lessons from the Civil War, contact Ox Hill Leadership Tours at 703-531-8837 and [info@oxhilltours.com](mailto:info@oxhilltours.com). Or visit our website at [www.oxhilltours.com](http://www.oxhilltours.com).*