

MOMENTS IN HISTORY

Say What You Mean

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In late June of 1863 the Gettysburg Campaign was well underway. The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by General Robert E. Lee, had embarked on its second invasion of the North. The Great Invasion would end in failure for Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. One of the many reasons for that failure was the lack of adequate cavalry to screen Lee's advance and provide key intelligence during the critical week of the campaign.

Why was Lee's army without its "eyes and ears" during most of the Gettysburg campaign? Part of the reason lies in Lee's failure to adequately and fully communicate with one of his key subordinates — Confederate cavalry commander James Ewell Brown (Jeb) Stuart.

Prior to the Gettysburg Campaign, Stuart had made a name for himself as an elite cavalry commander. In the campaigns of 1862 General Stuart and his troopers had ridden around Union armies twice. Stuart had also successfully led a number of raids behind Unions lines. Most important, Stuart excelled at fulfilling the main task of cavalry in the Civil War - being the eyes and ears of Lee's army. In campaign after campaign in 1862 and in early 1863, Stuart had performed admirably in screening Lee's army and providing Lee with timely and accurate information on the location, size and intention of the opposing army.

In June of 1863 General Lee was determined to follow-up his smashing victory at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia in May of 1863, with a knockout blow north of the Potomac that would end the war and gain independence for the Confederacy. One of the keys to victory for Lee in the campaign would be the active and diligent service of Stuart's cavalry. More than at any time in the war, Lee would be dependent on Stuart to give him timely and accurate information on the location and movements of the Union army.

As the vanguard of Lee's infantry, the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia under General Richard Ewell, prepared to cross the Potomac River into

Maryland, Lee sent several orders to Stuart outlining his role. He noted to Stuart the importance of connecting with Ewell, once the Second Corps had crossed the Potomac, and of keeping Lee well-informed of the movements of the Union Army. Not being a micro-manager, Lee gave Stuart discretion on where to actually cross the Potomac.

Unfortunately for Lee, the commanding general also gave Stuart discretion to ride around the entire Union army — with an eye towards gaining valuable intelligence, cutting telegraph and rail lines, and causing chaos in the Union ranks. Lee gave Stuart this discretion only if Stuart felt he could do so expeditiously and quickly connect with Ewell in Maryland.

An aggressive and daring officer, Stuart was anxious to repair his reputation which took an unaccustomed hit earlier in the month when his cavalry was surprised by Union horsemen at the Battle of Brandy Station. It took Stuart all day to fight off a desperate Union attack. For the first time in his Civil War career Stuart was severely criticized in the Southern press.

But however anxious Stuart was to repair his sullied reputation, Stuart was, first and foremost, an excellent and loyal officer. Had Lee ordered him to cross the Potomac and immediately connect with Ewell, Stuart would have done so. But Lee gave Stuart the discretion to ride around the Union army. And Stuart did so.

And the result was disastrous to the Confederate army. Almost as soon as Stuart began his movement, the Union army — more than 85,000 men — also began to move north — mirroring Lee's army. Blocked by masses of Union infantry, harassing enemy cavalry and slowed by a huge captured wagon train, Stuart was thwarted in his repeated attempts to get back to Lee's army. The end result of Stuart's decision to try and ride around the Union army was that for more than a week he was out of contact with his commanding officer. Without timely intelligence from Stuart, Lee's forces blundered into combat at the crossroads town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania where it would fight it out with the Union army for three fateful days. Stuart would not catch up to Lee until the second day of the battle. His exhausted troopers had little impact on the third and final day of the battle.

Many historians have cast the blame for Lee's defeat at Gettysburg on Stuart, claiming that Stuart's absence from Lee for that critical week caused Lee to fight "blind" at Gettysburg. Powerful and compelling arguments can be made on both sides.

From a leadership perspective, I believe the blame lies squarely on Lee's shoulders. Lee knew full well the vast importance of the invasion and of the

critical role Stuart was to play. To avoid any chance that Stuart might be deterred or delayed in fulfilling his critical mission to screen the advance of Lee's army, Lee should not have given Stuart any discretion at all. He should have ordered Stuart to cross the Potomac and immediately connect with Ewell.

What lessons can today's leaders draw from this episode?

Perhaps the best one is to communicate clearly and unambiguously with subordinates — especially when trying to implement a critical project. If you want a subordinate to complete an important task in a certain way by a certain date — make that clear and don't give the subordinate any discretion in how to complete the task and when. Set clear, achievable and unambiguous goals and deadlines. And, equally as important, communicate often with your subordinate to ensure that he or she is meeting the goals, is getting the support they need and continues to understand the mission.

A leader may have in his or her mind a clear idea of how a task should be performed. But if that vision is not communicated clearly to subordinates, chances are things will veer off course.

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