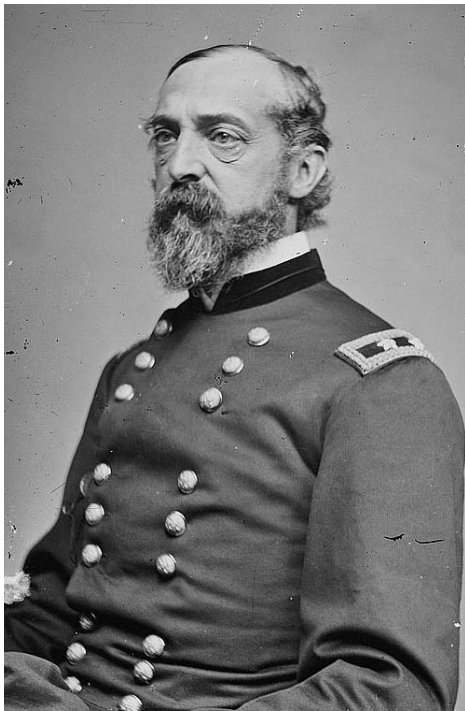


# ***MOMENTS IN LEADERSHIP***

## **March 2012: Making Sound, Tough Decisions on Time**

### ***George Meade at Gettysburg***



It is the evening of July 2, 1863 – the end of the second day of fighting at the Battle of Gettysburg. Union General George Gordon Meade has a tough decision to make. He has been in command of the Union Army of the Potomac less than four days. Through two years of warfare, the army has known only frustration and defeat. Now the army is fighting on Northern soil – in Meade’s native state of Pennsylvania. Meade is the fifth commander the army has had in two years. Should the army be defeated in Pennsylvania it would not only end Meade’s military career, but also could result in the Union losing the war.

***The stakes have never been higher.***

On the battle’s first day lead elements of the Union army engaged the Confederates on the hills and fields west and north of Gettysburg. After a tough fight, Meade’s troops were routed but were able to rally on the formidable hills and ridges south of town. Meade arrives on the battlefield on the evening of Day One and decides to stay and fight. His remaining units, which are spread out south and east of Gettysburg, are ordered to concentrate. By the end of July 2, 1863 all elements of the Union army are on the field.

On the afternoon of July 2<sup>nd</sup> Meade’s army is fiercely attacked on all sides. The fighting lasts until 10:00 pm. The Union army has been badly battered – suffering 30 to 40 percent casualties. With the exception of his Sixth Corps all of Meade’s other corps are in poor condition. At several places along the line his army has nearly broken. Meade has spent most of the day shifting troops across the battlefield plugging gaps in the line. He has not slept in days.

What to do now? Retreat? Attack? Stay in place?

Meade calls a council of war to seek the input of his top subordinates. During this council the dire state of the army is confirmed. However, Meade also learns from the army's newly formed Bureau of Military Information that the Confederate army has sustained heavy casualties and only has one fresh division (about 6,000 men) left. Meade's Sixth Corps (about 18,000 men) is relatively fresh and the army is well supplied. However, while strong, the army's current position is vulnerable to being flanked. The army has fought well for two days, but may be on the brink of breaking – there is no way to know for sure.

Meade and his “management team” review several options that fateful summer evening.

Option 1: Counter-attack. The ground on the army's left could allow Meade to attack the enemy, roll up his line and cut him off from escape. The Sixth Corps is fresh and available to lead such an offensive. While Meade knows that such an attack will result in high casualties and possible disaster, he also knows that, if successful, it could possibly end the war. This is the riskiest option by far.

Option 2: Retreat to a Better Position. Meade's engineers have sketched out an almost impregnable position about 15 miles south of Gettysburg along Pipe Creek. This position would allow Meade to cover Washington, DC as well as the key city of Baltimore, MD. A few days earlier Meade issued a circular to all of his subordinates naming Pipe Creek as a fall back position, so Meade knows his commanders are familiar with it. The army can use several good roads to get safely to Pipe Creek. Such a move would force Lee to attack Meade in a much more formidable position than the current one. It would also almost guarantee that the Army would avoid another morale-sapping disaster. It is the safe play given the stakes involved.

Option 3: Stand Pat. A third option is to stand pat and await another enemy attack. The army has plenty of artillery (a devastating weapon on the defense), ample ammunition and adequate reserves to plug any holes. Meade knows the enemy has only one fresh division left. The risk involved with this option is that if the enemy does manage to break through, the Confederates would have won yet another victory – this one on Northern soil. The enemy would be in a position to capture Washington, DC. But this option would also boost morale by staying in place and not retreating in the face of Lee's army – as the Army of the Potomac has done so many times in the past. Finally, Meade knows that his troops always fight well on the defensive.

The majority of his subordinates vote for the third option. This vote, combined with the excellent intelligence he has about the enemy and Meade's appreciation of the political ramifications of a defeat or perceived defeat, gives Meade the confidence to make the tough decision to stay and fight it out. In retrospect, it was the right decision. On July 3, 1863, Lee launched a massive attack against the Union center – known to history as Pickett's Charge. The attack was easily repulsed and caused huge casualties in the Confederate army. It ended the fighting at Gettysburg, forced Lee's army to retreat back to Virginia and resulted in a desperately needed victory for the North.

While the Civil War would continue for almost another two years, Gettysburg marked a clear turning point. Never again would the Confederates be able to launch a serious invasion of the north. It was the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. Much of the credit for that victory should go to George Gordon Meade. He faced unimaginable pressures and responsibilities. He rose to the occasion. Meade made good use of the information at hand, solicited timely advice from his subordinates and used that input to make the tough decision to fight it out. And because of that, he changed the course of U.S. history.

From a management and decision-making perspective, not much has changed in 149 years. Leaders still have to make tough, timely decisions. In making those decisions it is critical to try and have as much information as possible, objectively assess that information, solicit the input of subordinates and take into consideration the big picture. More often than not, leaders who employ these principles end up making the right decision.