

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

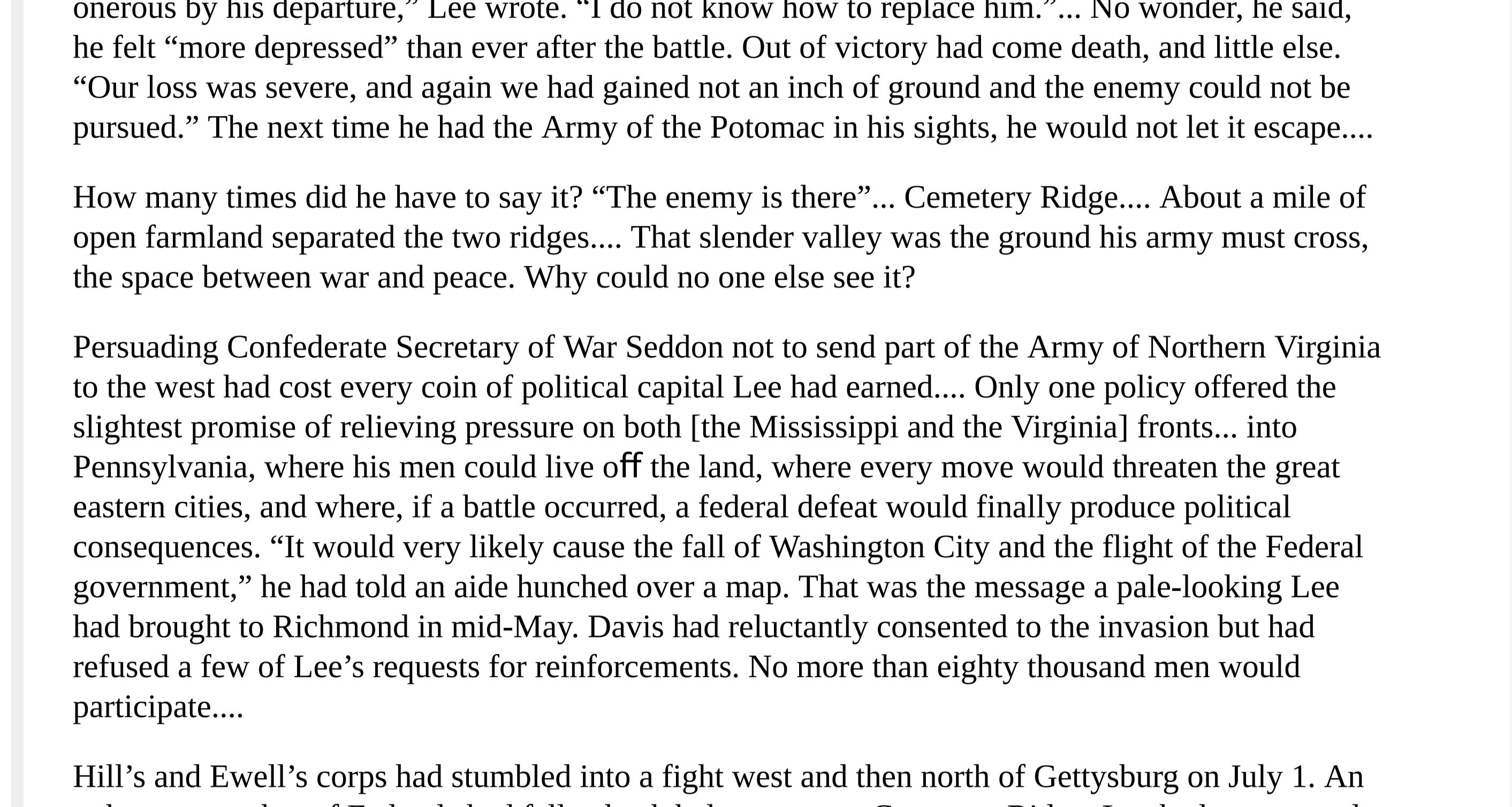
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Horn: Robert E. Lee & co.'s Road to Cemetery Ridge—Weekend Reading & Noted



This, from Jonathan Horn, is the best thing I have ever read on the road that led Robert E Lee and George Pickett's division to Pennsylvania—where they grabbed American citizens and shipped them south to be sold as slaves—and then to the disastrous charge up Cemetery Ridge. The Pickett division soldiers dead at Gettysburg could have kept the American Civil War going for one or two months more. At war's end Ulysses S. Grant "felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse".

Jonathan Horn *The Man Who Would Not be Washington* https://books.google.com/books?id=n_5tAwAAQBAJ: "Winning a major battle on Northern soil might end the war, and that, as Lee would later say, was his chief purpose. "I went into Maryland to give battle..."... Lee intended to isolate Washington, DC, from the west. He would not let reinforcements from the mountains and beyond rescue the eastern cities. He would destroy the B&O Railroad and, once more, that pesky Potomac canal.... When Brigadier General John Walker visited Lee's tent, he learned what else his chief had in mind.... Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and blow up the railroad bridge over the Susquehanna. "There will [then] remain to the enemy but one route of communication with the West, and that very circuitous, by way of the Lakes," Lee explained. "After that I can turn my attention to Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington, as may seem best for our interests."

The audacity of it all astonished Walker.... The concern showed on Walker's face. "Are you acquainted with General McClellan?" Lee asked rhetorically. "He is an able general but a very cautious one. His enemies among his own people think him too much so. His army is in a very demoralized and chaotic condition, and will not be prepared for offensive operations—or he will not think it so—for three or four weeks." By then, Lee planned to have his columns consolidated and in Pennsylvania, no less...

... "The lives of our soldiers are too precious to be sacrificed in the attainment of successes that inflict no loss upon the enemy beyond the actual loss in battle," Lee warned James Seddon, the new Confederate secretary of war.... A strategy of trading territory for time would yield neither. The South needed to snap the North's political will before the North shredded the South's social order....

On May 10 [1863], the only officer whose present stardom rivaled Lee's died in semidelirium. Losing Jackson made Lee all the more indispensable. "Our labor [is] rendered more severe, more onerous by his departure," Lee wrote. "I do not know how to replace him..."... No wonder, he said, he felt "more depressed" than ever after the battle. Out of victory had come death, and little else. "Our loss was severe, and again we had gained not an inch of ground and the enemy could not be pursued." The next time he had the Army of the Potomac in his sights, he would not let it escape....

How many times did he have to say it? "The enemy is there".... Cemetery Ridge.... About a mile of open farmland separated the two ridges.... That slender valley was the ground his army must cross, the space between war and peace. Why could no one else see it?

Persuading Confederate Secretary of War Seddon not to send part of the Army of Northern Virginia to the west had cost every coin of political capital Lee had earned.... Only one policy offered the slightest promise of relieving pressure on both [the Mississippi and the Virginia] fronts... into Pennsylvania, where his men could live off the land, where every move would threaten the great eastern cities, and where, if a battle occurred, a federal defeat would finally produce political consequences. "It would very likely cause the fall of Washington City and the flight of the Federal government," he had told an aide hunched over a map. That was the message a pale-looking Lee had brought to Richmond in mid-May. Davis had reluctantly consented to the invasion but had refused a few of Lee's requests for reinforcements. No more than eighty thousand men would participate....

Hill's and Ewell's corps had stumbled into a fight west and then north of Gettysburg on July 1. An unknown number of Federals had fallen back below town to Cemetery Ridge. Lee had not wanted to bring on a battle, not yet, anyway. But now that it had begun, not a doubt stirred in his mind about how to proceed. His lieutenants needed to seize Cemetery Ridge.... July 1, he instructed Ewell... seize the hills at the north end of the ridge if "practicable." Many of Ewell's subordinates thought it plenty practicable, but the new corps commander dragged his feet.... The next day... Longstreet's... flanking march.... Longstreet protested. Had not Lee promised to fight a defensive battle? Only grudgingly did Longstreet submit.... The flanking march took longer.... the Union line stretched longer.... Ferociously as the Confederates fought, they failed to roll up that ridge. As to why, there would be time enough to debate later.

Now it was July 3[1], 1863]. Tomorrow would be July 4.... "If God gives us the victory, the war will be over and we shall achieve the recognition of our independence," officers had heard Lee say.... This very day, July 3, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens would... ask permission to proceed... to Washington, DC, for negotiations. How much stronger his position would look—how much more expansive the talks might be—if the Army of the Potomac no longer stood between Lee and the city of Washington.

Longstreet advised maneuvering around... instead of charging.... But the enemy was on that ridge. The senior corps commander might not understand, but the men in the ranks did. "There never were such men in an army before. They will go anywhere and do anything if properly led." Cocksure Major General George Pickett would lead part of the charge and was "sanguine of success."... Two groves of trees five hundred yards apart would serve as the goalposts, a stone wall running between as the crossbar. That was the center of the federal line. That was where the Union would break in two.... Longstreet registered another protest for posterity. "It is my opinion that no fifteen thousand men ever arrayed for battle can take that position...."

Upward, into the canister and rifle fire raining down from Cemetery Ridge, they charged. Toward the stone wall, the boldest still standing swarmed before disappearing into an impenetrable cloud of smoke. Visions of Washington falling vanished with the view. Cheers rose in the distance. For one last moment, so did hope in Lee's heart. He mounted Traveller. "See what that cheering means," he instructed an officer. Before hearing back, he knew. Those cheers were for the Union.... Told to prepare his division for a counterattack, Pickett said he had "no division."... Lee greeted the remnants.... "All this has been my fault," he told an officer. "It is I that have lost this fight, and you must help me out of it in the best way you can."

Although that would be Lee's most famous explanation for Gettysburg, it would not be his only explanation. He faulted subordinates for failing to inform him that the cannonade... would leave scant ammunition to support the battle line. He faulted his corps commanders.... Ewell had shown indecision; then Longstreet and Hill "could not be gotten to act in concert." He faulted Stuart for leaving his army blind.... Stonewall Jackson's... demise at Chancellorsville deprived the Confederacy of victory at Gettysburg.

Mostly, Lee fell back on a familiar formulation, one that stripped him of any agency.... "With the knowledge I then had, and in the circumstances I was then placed, I do not know what better course I could have pursued." His reports described the battle as "unavoidable" once the armies had collided. "Victory," he later said, "trembled in the balance for three days." The Confederacy had come so close. "But God willed otherwise."...

[But] try as he might, Lee could not shake those first feelings of responsibility. A belief in his army's invincibility had seduced him into ordering his soldiers to perform the impossible:

No blame can be attached to the army for its failure to accomplish what was projected.... It has accomplished all that could have been reasonably expected. It ought not to have been expected to have performed impossibilities or to have fulfilled the anticipations of the thoughtless and unreasonable....

Thoughtless and unreasonable was exactly how Lee's behavior had seemed to Longstreet.... "General Lee... lost the matchless equanimity that usually characterized him... mistakes were made were... the impulses of a great mind disturbed by unparalleled conditions."...

For secessionists, July 4 brought a succession of setbacks. At Vicksburg, Confederates stacked their weapons before the master of the Mississippi, Ulysses S. Grant. At Fort Monroe, federal officers received orders from Washington to "hold no communication" with the Confederate vice president unless told otherwise. At Gettysburg, the Confederate retreat toward the Potomac started under a strong storm.... "O God! Why can't I die?" the wounded cried. Union cavalry striking like lightning pierced the long trains as they moved through the storm....

At last, on July 13 and 14[1], 1863].... Lee had escaped. To call it divine deliverance would ignore what he left behind: the dead, the wounded, the missing. "The death of our gallant officers & men throughout the army causes me to weep tears of blood and to wish that I never would hear the sound of a gun again," he said. Of the eighty thousand men Davis had agreed to supply for the invasion, a startling 27,125 became casualties. If arithmetic posed a problem before Gettysburg, it would crest toward crisis after....

[But as Jefferson] Davis put it, "To ask me to substitute you by some one in my judgment more fit to command, or who would possess more of the confidence of the army, or of the reflecting men of the country, is to demand an impossibility." So for twenty more months, Robert E. Lee would remain a soldier. He was, in a word, indispensable...

Cf. also: **John Bell Hood: Advances & Retreats: Personal Experiences in the United States & Confederate Armies** <https://books.google.com/books?id=irVvCwAAQBAJ>: I moved on with all possible speed... and arrived about 4.30 p.m. [on June 27, 1862 at Gaines's Mill].... Here I found General Lee, seated upon his horse. He rode forward to meet me, and, extending his usual greeting, announced to me that our troops had been fighting gallantly, but had not succeeded in dislodging the enemy; he added, "This must be done. Can you break his line?" I replied that I would try.

I immediately formed my brigade in line of battle with Hampton's Legion on the left. In front was a dense woods and ugly marsh, which totally concealed the enemy from us; but the terrible roar of artillery and musketry plainly revealed, however, that thousands and thousands of living souls were struggling in most deadly conflict for the mastery of that field, and I might say, almost under the shadow of the Capitol of the infant Confederacy.

My line was established, and moved forward, regiment by regiment, when I discovered, as the disposition of the Eighteenth Georgia was completed, an open field a little to its right. Holding in reserve the Fourth Texas, I ordered the advance, and galloped into the open field or pasture, from which point I could see, at a distance of about eight hundred yards, the position of the Federals. They were heavily entrenched upon the side of an elevated ridge running a little west and south, and extending to the vicinity of the Chickahominy.

At the foot of the slope ran Powhatan creek, which stream, together with the abatis in front of their works, constituted a formidable obstruction to our approach, whilst batteries, supported by masses of infantry, crowned the crest of the hill in rear, and long range guns were posted upon the south side of the Chickahominy, in readiness to enfilade our advancing columns. The ground from which I made these observations was, however, open the entire distance to their entrenchments. In a moment I determined to advance from that point, to make a strenuous effort to pierce the enemy's fortifications, and, if possible, put him to flight.

I therefore marched the Fourth Texas by the right flank into this open field, halted and dressed the line whilst under fire of the long-range guns, and gave positive instructions that no man should fire until I gave the order; for I knew full well that if the men were allowed to fire, they would halt to load, break the alignment, and, very likely, never reach the breastworks. I moreover ordered them not only to keep together, but also in line, and announced to them that I would lead them in the charge. Forward march was sounded, and we moved at a rapid, but not at a double-quick pace. Meantime, my regiments on the left had advanced some distance to the front through the wood and swamp.

Onward we marched under a constantly increasing shower of shot and shell, whilst to our right could be seen some of our troops making their way to the rear, and others lying down beneath a galling fire. Our ranks were thinned at almost every step forward, and proportionately to the growing fury of the storm of projectiles. Soon we attained the crest of the bald ridge within about one hundred and fifty yards of the breastworks. Here was concentrated upon us, from batteries in front and flank, a fire of shell and canister, which ploughed through our ranks with deadly effect. Already the gallant Colonel Marshall, together with many other brave men, had fallen victims in this bloody onset.

At a quickened pace we continued to advance, without firing a shot, down the slope, over a body of our soldiers lying on the ground, to and across Powhatan creek, when, amid the fearful roar of musketry and artillery, I gave the order to fix bayonets and charge. With a ringing shout we dashed up the steep hill, through the abatis, and over the breastworks, upon the very heads of the enemy. The Federals, panic-stricken, rushed precipitately to the rear upon the infantry in support of the artillery; suddenly the whole joined in the flight toward the valley beyond.

At this juncture some twenty guns, stationed in rear of the Federal line on a hill to my left, opened fire upon the Fourth Texas, which changed front, and charged in their direction. I halted in an orchard beyond the works, and despatched every officer of my staff to the main portion of the brigade in the wood on the left, instructing them to bear the glad tidings that the Fourth Texas had pierced the enemy's line, and were moving in his rear, and to deliver orders to push forward with utmost haste. At the same moment I discovered a Federal brigade marching up the slope from the valley beyond, evidently with the purpose to re-establish the line. I ran back to the entrenchments, appealed to some of our troops, who, by this time, had advanced to the breastworks, to come forward off this small body of Federals. They remained, however, motionless.

Jenkins's command, if I mistake not, which was further to our right, boldly advanced and put this brigade to rout. Meantime, the long line of blue and steel to the right and left wavered, and, finally, gave way, as the Eighteenth Georgia, the First and Fifth Texas, and Hampton's Legion gallantly moved forward from right to left, thus completing a grand left wheel of the brigade into the very heart of the enemy. Simultaneously with this movement burst forth a tumultuous shout of victory, which was taken up along the whole Confederate line. I mounted my horse, rode forward, and found the Fourth Texas and Eighteenth Georgia had captured fourteen pieces of artillery, whilst the Fifth Texas had charge of a Federal regiment which had surrendered to it.

Many were the deeds of valor upon that memorable field. General Jackson, in reference to this onset, says in his official report:

No blame can be attached to the army for its failure to accomplish what was projected.... It has accomplished all that could have been reasonably expected. It ought not to have been expected to have performed impossibilities or to have fulfilled the anticipations of the thoughtless and unreasonable....

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Brad DeLong's Short Biography

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