FMFM 1-1 and Lee at Gettysburg

by Maj F. G. Hoffman, USMCR

There is much to be learned from military history, but unless it is studied with care the student may draw the wrong conclusion.

Like its recent progenitor *FMFM 1 Warfighting, FMFM 1-1 Campaigning* is extremely well written, simple yet profound. It will, and should, have a significant impact on operational excellence in the Fleet Marine Force (FMF). This assumes that the lessons contained in *FMFM 1-1* are understood; unfortunately one of the examples does not pass muster.

This limitation in the latest capstone document is the employment of a questionable historical interpretation to illustrate a point. Chapter 1 uses the strategical approaches of Gen Ulysses S. Grant and Gen Robert E. Lee as a case study to exhibit how operational considerations are applied. Overall, history has not treated Grant well, while Lee has been deified despite some significant mistakes. Grant is often described as a "butcher" who employed his advantages in numbers and logistics to grind down the Confederacy. Lee is frequently, almost without question, favorably compared with the greatest of generals. These oversimplifications are properly corrected in *FMFM 1-1*. However, the text (pp. 16-23) goes on to criticize Lee for selecting a military strategy inconsistent with the national strategy of the fledgling Confederacy:

> Lee's strategy was questionable at best—both as a viable means of attaining the South's policy aims and also in regard to operational practicability, particularly the South's logistical ability to sustain offensive campaigns.

"While the aims Lee set out to achieve at Gettysburg were sound, numerous mistakes at the operational level compromised whatever chance of success he initially possessed."

This criticism is a debatable point, supported by few historians and contrary to documented accounts of the 1863 campaign. Lee was, if anything, a classical strategist. *FMFM 1-1* is obviously based on J.F.C. Fuller's personality study of Lee and Grant and some of Russell F. Weigley's historical analysis, which assumes that Lee was anxious to ensure victory through a climatic Napoleonic battle of annihilation.

While the actual execution of the Gettysburg campaign is replete with both operational and tactical failure, the decision to initiate an offensive in the summer of 1863 was strategically sound for numerous reasons. Each of these reasons was argued in cabinet meetings in April and May 1863 in Richmond. The final decision was made by the political leadership of the Confederacy to achieve policy objectives.

Clearly, a major offensive against the Union north of the border was risky. However, it was obvious to Lee at this time that his Army was rapidly reaching a "culminating point" vis-a-vis the Army of the Potomac. Although morale was high after the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville victories, time was clearly working against the Confederacy. The loss of senior leaders, such as Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, had been costly, and it was obvious that the strategic defensive would not bring Lee the decisive results he needed.

Lee's defensive tactics and strategy were largely forced upon him by his lack of combat power and the requisite logistics to support a more mobile and offensive strategy. It was clear to Lee that the South could not sustain conflict indefinitely against the logistically superior North. Ultimately, the North would win a war of attrition if the South was willing to sit still and absorb the punishment being meted out by the Army of the Potomac.

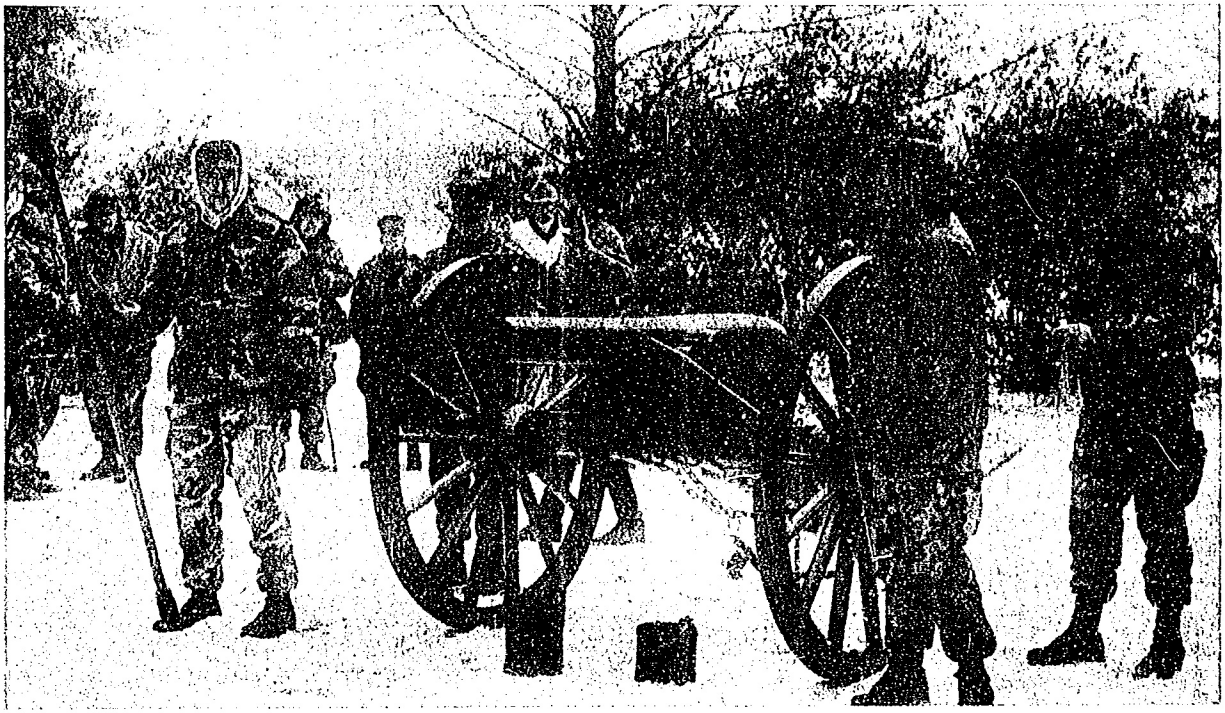
Thus, the decision was made to initiate an offensive campaign. An offensive was a calculated gamble to achieve both strategic and tactical objectives. Major policy objectives included weakening Lincoln's position in Washington, which was already threatened by numerous opponents, including the Peace Democrats and the press. Draft riots were injuring hundreds in major cities in the Northeast. Military threats against Philadelphia, Baltimore, Harrisburg, and the Nation's capital would seriously impair the President's power base and his tenuous hold on the reins of government.

A major campaign that resulted in tactical successes north of the border could also result in formal recognition from Britain, which desired cotton for its mills and might provide the Confederacy Lee-Enfield rifles to get it. Formal recognition from Europe would gain political legitimacy for the Confederacy, much needed foreign credits, and commerce to restore a crippled economy.

"With limited planning and intelligence efforts, vague instructions to key subordinates, misemployment of cavalry, and overall combat power miscalculations, Lee made enough mistakes to mark the battle Gettysburg as a classic in operational and tactical failure."

Furthermore, severe pressure against Washington would draw attention, and hopefully resources, away from Grant and the Mississippi Valley. This strategic goal, a major objective in early discussions between Lee and Jefferson Davis, was obviated, however, on 30 April when Grant solved the enigma of Vicksburg.

A sustained offensive through Maryland and Pennsylvania would also



In the picture above, officers from the staff of MajGen Donald R. Gardner man a Civil War artillery piece at the site of the Battle of Bentonville in North Carolina. In the background, the battlefield's curator, John Goode describes Civil War tactics. The two-day battle occurred in March 1865 when 27,000 troops under Gen Joseph E. Johnston of the Confederacy attempted to halt Union general William T. Sherman's advance by attacking his left flank. After some initial success, Johnston was forced to withdraw and Sherman continued on his way. In the picture at the bottom right, MajGen Gardner reads a sign posted at a creek crossing at Bentonville. Enhancing professional military education with such activities may be the best way for Marines to gain true appreciation of why some battles are won and others lost.

achieve numerous lesser objectives: the freeing of the Shenandoah Valley and its loyal inhabitants from Union occupation, access to the valley's fertile fields to feed both Richmond and Petersburg, and an opportunity to provision and shoe the lean Army of Northern Virginia in the fat farms of the Leigh Valley, as well as sparing Richmond and northern Virginia from the burden of another campaign.

Admittedly, the foregoing strategic considerations do not justify sparing Lee as an example for educational purposes to highlight the operational art. Lee's Gettysburg campaign is fraught with operational mistakes. With limited planning and intelligence efforts, vague instructions to key subordinates, misemployment of cavalry, and overall combat power miscalculations, Lee made enough mistakes to mark Gettysburg as a classic in operational and tactical failure. Ultimately, the summer of 1863 was acknowledged as the high tide of the Confederacy.

Lee's most severe mistake was to fail to employ deception and maneuver to induce George Meade to fight at a disadvantage during those hot, few days in July. Thus, he failed the essence of the operational art—deciding about when and where to give battle.

Regrettably, these lessons are not adequately detailed in *FMFM 1–1.* There is much to glean from a veteran general who was a master of the "habit of command," who usually fought outnumbered and won, who employed mission-type orders and let his subordinates work out the details. Lee has rightfully earned his place with the Great Captains. He was willing to do the unexpected, relied upon an austere logistics train, employed tactical maneuver and combined arms, and always kept a broad concept of his purpose and the policy objectives set out for him. There is much to learn from both Lee's successes and failures.

USMC

>Maj Hoffman is a defense analyst in the Requirements and Programs Division, HQMC.