CRISIS AT ANTIETAM

The Cornfield and West Woods, September 17, 1862

Steven Eden

Unedited Excerpt

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To my wife, the woman who supported me throughout the writing of this book, and the only woman who kindles in me a greater passion than the study of history does.

Somebody's darling! so young and so brave,

Wearing still on his pale, sweet face—

Soon to be hid by the dust of the grave—

The lingering light of his boyhood's grace.

Anonymous

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

LIST OF MAPS

Photos have been placed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

INTRODUCTION

A general officer told me many years ago that Robert E. Lee's Maryland Campaign encapsulated all the subjects a military historian could wish to study: strategy, tactics, leadership, logistics, intelligence, planning, communications, and politics.

I was skeptical. A boyhood fascination with war and battles led to a career in the US Army and a lifelong study of military affairs. I taught military history at West Point and participated in or led numerous staff rides across battlefields, old and new. Yet I had only a cursory understanding of the battle of Antietam and its central place in the story of the Civil War. My main interests were in other areas.

That changed after I retired from the Army and took on a new career as an instructor for the Department of Defense. My duties included presenting students with a case study of the Maryland Campaign and a tour of the field at Sharpsburg. For a decade I researched the campaign and the battle itself.

The general was right.

Antietam was not a decisive battle. Nor was it a turning point in the Civil War in the sense that everything afterward was Confederate decline and Union ascendence. It did, however, close off certain options for Northern or Southern victory. There would be no European recognition of the Confederacy following yet another defeat of the Army of the Potomac on Northern soil. On the other hand, the Army of Northern Virginia survived its darkest moment to fight on. The outcome of the battle transformed the war from a rebellion to a crusade that brooked no compromise peace, with all the ensuing slaughter and misery that entailed.

Yet this is not what enthralled me. Others have written on the strategic and political importance of the Maryland Campaign and there seems little left to say on that subject. I was interested in how decisions made before and during the battle affected combat performance; why units recoiled in advancing or gave way

in defense; what made one regiment fall apart while another stood its ground while being shot to pieces.

We have all seen battlefield maps with arrows showing attacks and retreats. I wanted to know what was happening inside those arrows. That is the focus of *Crisis at Antietam: The Cornfield and West Woods, September 17, 1862*.

My study begins with an overview of the campaign showing how the pre-battle maneuvering limited tactical options once the fight was joined. The struggle over the famous Cornfield is examined in detail, from the initial clash on September 16 to the final expulsion of the Union from its toehold in the West Woods the next day. The reader will come away from this narrative appreciating that the competence of the troops, earned on many bloody battlefields, far exceeded the competence of their senior officers. Both Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan fettered their subordinates by their plans, and those subordinates were unable to compensate for their mistakes. The result was a series of head-on collisions and sweeping envelopments that seemed beyond the control of the generals, a chaotic fight where luck and timing played as important a role as any order given that day.

If this work differs from the many others that have come before it, it is because I have tried to show what the men in the regiments saw, what they believed was happening, and why they acted the way they did. Of particular importance are the decisions made by the colonels and captains commanding those regiments. There were instances of panic and ill-discipline that wrecked units, but most often the actions of a regiment were dictated by the judgment of its commander—sometimes colored by fear, sometimes by considerations of honor, almost always with the most tenuous understanding of the situation—trying to ensure that his boys did not sacrifice their lives in vain. This aspect of Civil War combat is underemphasized.

To dig so deep is much easier these days with the advent of so much digitized material. Apart from background and biographical material, I have tried to base this narrative entirely on primary sources and on the memories of men who were there. More books, diaries, letters, manuscripts, and unpublished memoirs are available to the researcher sitting comfortably before his laptop than even just a few years ago—resources that would have taken years of travel to access in the past. Of particular worth are the online period newspapers full of battle reports and anecdotes from participants. This treasure trove has not yet been fully mined. Repositories of letters, sketches, and correspondence remain entirely analog, and I spent many hours trawling through the files of the small but excellent library at Antietam National Battlefield Park and the Army War College.

My hope is that you will put down this volume with a better understanding of the nuts-and-bolts of Civil War combat and glean how senior leaders set the conditions—intentionally or otherwise—under which those regiments mentioned

above must fight. At Antietam, few generals made life easier for their subordinates. In many cases, they made them shorter. After researching and writing this book, I have a lower opinion of the performance of the generals and a greater appreciation of how difficult it was for them to influence the course of the battle. I hope you will also.

Antietam was a slaughterhouse because lethal regiments were in the hands of men still learning their trade. That is a lesson that has echoed down through the one-and-a-half centuries since.

CHAPTER 1

THE MOST PROPITIOUS TIME

On the third day of September 1862, Robert E. Lee sat down in his tent near Dranesville, Virginia, to compose a letter to President Jefferson Davis. He had to dictate it to his military secretary, Col. Armistead L. Long, having broken a bone in his right hand and badly sprained his left trying to restrain a shying horse a few days before.

It was a fine day, cool and cloudless, as Lee worked his way slowly through an explanation for his decision to invade the North. "The present seems the most propitious time since the commencement of the war for the Confederate Army to enter Maryland. The two grand armies of the United States that have been operating in Virginia, though now united, are much weakened and demoralized." Lee had no intention of attacking Washington, heavily fortified and now swarming with newly levied regiments, but if "it is ever desired to give material aid to Maryland and afford her an opportunity of throwing off the oppression to which she is now subject," he could think of no better time. He also pointed out that drawing the enemy north would relieve pressure on Richmond and win time for improving Confederate defenses.

Lee went on to describe the state of his Army of Northern Virginia after a hard summer of campaigning. "The army is not properly equipped for an invasion of an enemy's territory. It lacks much of the material of war, is feeble in transportation, the animals being much reduced, and the men are poorly provided with clothes, and in thousands of instances are destitute of shoes." Despite this, "we cannot afford to be idle, and though weaker than our opponents in men and military equipments, must endeavor to harass, if we cannot destroy them."[1] It was a conclusion that encapsulated

1 Clifford Dowdey, ed., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (New York, 1961), 292.

the gulf between Lee and his perpetually indecisive, overcautious opponent, the commander of the Army of the Potomac Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan.

The Confederate commander was explaining a decision he had already made, not requesting permission from Davis. Long before any reply could have reached him, the Confederate vanguard was already crossing the Potomac into Maryland. Nor did he fully explicate his motivations, perhaps from worry that politicians in Richmond might disapprove if the full scope of his ambitions were known.

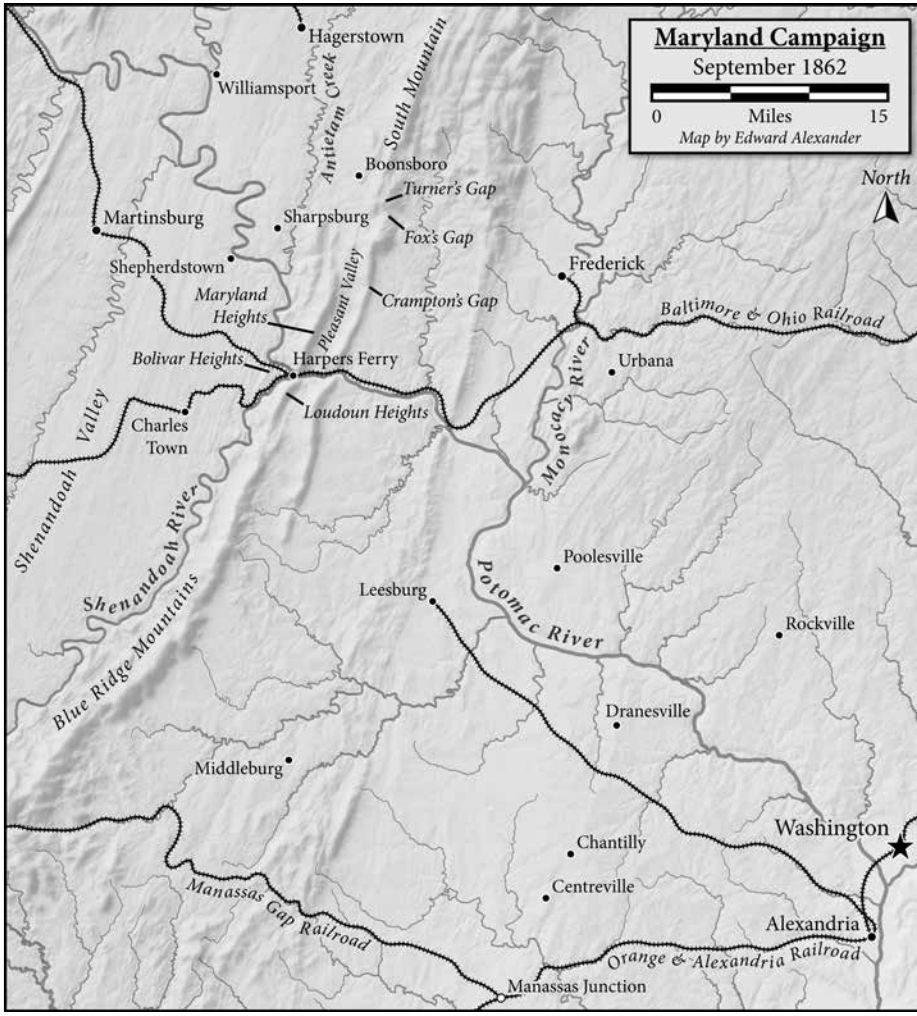
In his final report on the 1862 campaign, filed long after his retreat south, Lee outlined the strategic thinking that had led to the formulation of his plan. "It was decided to cross the Potomac east of the Blue Ridge, in order, by threatening Washington and Baltimore, to cause the enemy to withdraw from the south bank, where his presence endangered our communications. . . Having accomplished this result, it was proposed to move the army into Western Maryland, establish our communications with Richmond through the Valley of the Shenandoah, and, by threatening Pennsylvania, induce the enemy to follow."[2]

In other words, Lee wanted to transfer the war to the north. Doing so meant feeding the army from the rich harvests of western Maryland and southern Pennsylvania, while preserving Virginia's crops for the south. He thought the presence of Southern troops might encourage Marylanders to rise against the Union, though he was not entirely sanguine about the possibility. He expected to "derive more assistance in the attainment of our object from the just fears of the Washington Government than from any active demonstration on the part of the people," though the Confederate trains would include extra muskets and uniforms to accommodate the anticipated rush of Maryland volunteers. Lee painted the incursion into Maryland as nothing more than an extended raid, albeit one which might "detain the enemy upon the northern frontier until the approach of winter should render his advance into Virginia difficult, if not impracticable."[3]

How much of this reflects Lee's thinking at the time and how much is post-campaign apologetics remains a subject of dispute. The account of Maj. Gen. John G. Walker of an encounter he had with Lee, written long after the war, hints that Lee may have had larger ambitions. Many have cast doubt on the fidelity of Walker's recounting of this meeting, written more than two decades after the fact. The general was a notorious fabulist with a penchant for magnifying his own role in affairs. This particular anecdote does seem suspiciously tidy and precise.

2 U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*: *A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 19, 1:145. Hereafter referred to as *OR* and understood to be ser. 1, vol. 19, part 1, unless otherwise noted.

3 Ibid., 144.



Moreover, Lee was not known for confiding his plans to those outside his circle of trusted advisers. The current judgment of history is that the conversation was invented; nevertheless, there are two points that seem genuine in reflecting Lee's thoughts, nuggets that Walker may have overheard or come to understand during the campaign.

The first of these was the object of concentrating the army west of the Blue Ridge in the Cumberland Valley near Hagerstown. The second was Lee's assessment of McClellan. Lee considered McClellan able but cautious, a characteristic that should provide the Army of Northern Virginia a grace period to position itself. "His army is in a very demoralized and chaotic condition," Lee supposedly said,

"and will not be prepared for offensive operations—or he will not think it so—for three or four weeks."[4]

In summary, Lee's initial thrust into Maryland east of the Blue Ridge was designed to draw the Union armies north of their citadel around Washington by threatening that city and Baltimore. Contrary to claims made in Walker's story, he had no intention of attacking either, but once the Army of the Potomac emerged from the forts surrounding the capitol he would withdraw into the Cumberland Valley. McClellan must follow him in an attempt to eject the Rebels from Northern territory, and Lee felt sure he could arrange to bring them to battle at a time and place of his own choosing, and once more inflict a disheartening defeat. If that proved to be impossible, Lee had no doubt he could avoid fighting at a disadvantage and stay north of the Potomac indefinitely.[5]

In broad outline the campaign began well enough. Confederate columns moved northward to Frederick and the Monocacy River. A Maryland woman, watching as the Rebels marched past her into Frederick, was struck by the wretched appearance of the southern soldiers. In a letter to a friend, she described "long, dirty columns . . . moving so smoothly along, with no order, their guns carried in every fashion, no two dressed alike, their officers hardly distinguishable from the privates." How was it, she wondered, that "these dirty, lank ugly specimens of humanity, with shocks of hair sticking through holes in their hats, and dust thick on their dirty faces . . . had coped and encountered successfully, and driven back again and again, our splendid legions with their fine discipline, their martial show and color, their solid battalions keeping such perfect time to the inspiring bands of music?"[6]

This motley horde of bummers had stolen a march on the Army of the Potomac, concentrating around Frederick from the 7th to the 9th of September, with the object of forcing the Union forces there to withdraw from all but the barest toehold in Virginia.

The enemy did indeed follow. In his memoirs, McClellan related that during an inspection of Union fortifications near Alexandria, he discerned that "the enemy had disappeared from the front of Washington, and the information which I received induced me to believe that he intended to cross the upper Potomac into Maryland." Union cavalry moved north and northwest from the capital, feeling for the Rebels, followed by slow-moving infantry which edged tentatively outside

4 John G. Walker, "Jackson's Capture of Harper's Ferry," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York, 1956), 2:605. All references to *B&L* are understood to be vol. 2.

5 Ibid., 606.

6 John W. Schildt, *Roads to Antietam* (Shippensburg, PA, 1997), 37–38.

of the Washington fortifications. McClellan stayed in the capital until the 7th of September, busying himself with all "the arrangements for the defense of the city," before handing the city over to Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Banks.[7]

McClellan kept his columns on a short leash, beset by worry. "The Army of the Potomac was thoroughly exhausted and depleted by its desperate fighting and severe marches . . . during the second Bull Run campaign." Unconsciously echoing his opposite number, he described the Army of the Potomac as "weary, disheartened, their organization impaired, their clothing, ammunition, and supplies in a pitiable condition." Moreover, McClellan was distraught over the price Union soldiers had paid over the long campaigning season. "I can hardly restrain myself," McClellan wrote to his wife as the Army of the Potomac marched out of Washington, "when I see how fearfully they are reduced in numbers, and realize how many of them lie unburied on the field of battle, where their lives were uselessly sacrificed."[8]

Had Lee remained inactive, McClellan would quite happily have spent the next few months—if not the full winter—restoring the army to full fighting trim, but "as the enemy maintained the offensive and crossed the upper Potomac, it became necessary to meet him at any cost, notwithstanding the condition of the troops."[9]

The state of the army was not his only concern. He knew that Lee was on the move, though he did not know his objective. He also believed—or affected to believe—that the Army of Northern Virginia greatly outnumbered his own, estimating that by the 9th there were already "110,000 on this side of the river [and] a large force near Leesburg." This mighty host had several different options open to it: an advance into Pennsylvania, a descent on Baltimore or Washington, or even a return to Virginia. McClellan felt compelled, despite the fraught strategic imbalance, that he must "learn . . . something definite as to the movements of the secession, to be enabled to regulate my own."[10] So he pushed his army forward cautiously, a half-dozen miles or so a day, having ceded the initiative to Lee and conforming his movements to those of the rebels.

This was precisely what Lee had intended. McClellan had left Virginia and was so far dancing to Lee's tune, moving farther from his secure base around the capital. The Army of Northern Virginia withdrew from Frederick and its positions along the banks of the Monocacy, crossing westwards into the Shenandoah. McClellan's

7 William C. Prime, ed., *McClellan's Own Story* (New York, 1887), 549–550. McClellan never actually completed his memoirs; this account was put together from his wartime reports, drafts, and other miscellanea.

8 Ibid., 567.

9 George B. McClellan, "From the Peninsula to Antietam," *B&L*, 554.

10 Prime, *McClellan's Own Story*, 568–569.

men advanced in their wake, though not with any great sense of urgency. As the regimental doctor of the 21st Massachusetts noted, "The marching in Maryland was not rapid or exhausting."[11]

So far so good, but an unexpected obstacle to Lee's scheme of maneuver arose when the Union forces in and around Harper's Ferry did not retreat as the Rebels moved north. Through inattention, bureaucratic mismanagement, and simple inertia, the Union inadvertently dealt a stinging blow to Lee's campaign.

End of Unedited Excerpt

11 Schildt, *Roads*, 32.