

The Battle of Chancellorsville

By Geoffrey Norman

By April 1863, America's Civil War was two years old and there were two more years of fighting ahead though, of course, none could know this. What everyone did know was that the war was violent and bloody beyond what anyone had expected or would have believed the nation (or two nations) could endure. Neither side was at the point of exhaustion or surrender. The war would certainly go on until. . . what?

Nobody quite knew, though an insight of President Abraham Lincoln's pointed to the brutal truth. His Army of the Potomac, under the command of General Ambrose Burnside, had been defeated at Fredericksburg by Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in December 1862. It had been a one-sided affair, with Union soldiers making repeated assaults up a hill against Confederate infantry whose position afforded the protection of a stone wall with artillery behind in support. No Union soldier even reached the wall. The Army of the Potomac suffered more than 12,000 casualties. Lee's casualties were slightly more than 5,000. It was the most lopsided defeat so far, for an army that had seldom experienced victory. And yet . . .

The Army of the Potomac still existed, was still holding its positions in Virginia, and its losses were being made good. Which could not be said for Lee's army.

So, Lincoln noted, the "arithmetic" of slaughter worked in the Union's favor. His army could survive a week of Fredericksburg and the Confederacy could not. Victory would come when he found a general who understood this.

He had named a new commander of the Army of the Potomac: General Joseph Hooker, sometimes known as "Fighting Joe." And, in truth, he was a fighter. He had commanded a corps at Antietam and led his men bravely on the Union right, in the battles that raged back and forth through the Cornfield where he took a bullet in the foot. He was back in action at Fredericksburg, in the failed assaults against the stone wall, which he called off, finally, saying, "Finding that I had lost as many men as my order required me to lose, I suspended the attack."

Hooker was rough goods. He liked a drink and his headquarters were frequented by ladies of the evening; hence the legend that his name gave rise to the slang term for prostitute. Lincoln was willing to overlook these flaws, among others, which included Hooker's disloyalty to his superiors. He had undermined Burnside and had been known to say that what the country needed was a dictator. Lincoln noted this in a letter appointing Hooker to command in which he wrote, "What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."

Hooker seemed like he might actually deliver. He swore off drink and went energetically to work restoring the morale of his beaten army. He improved the furlough system, secured back pay, improved rations, cleaned up the camps, and instituted rigorous drills and reviews. An army that had been despondent in January was back in fighting spirit in April, which Lincoln saw and appreciated on a five-day review. Before returning to Washington, he both cautioned Hooker against rashness and advised that when there was a fight he should be sure to "put in all your men." George McClellan had not done this at Antietam. Nor had Burnside at Fredericksburg.

All of his men, in Hooker's case, would amount to about 130,000 soldiers. His enemy, across the Rappahannock River, had less than half that number. And they were underfed, badly equipped, and poorly clothed. Their morale, however, was high and their confidence in themselves and their leader unshakable. Since Lee had taken over command, they had fought in 13 battles from the peninsula all the way up into Maryland. They had inflicted more than 70,000 casualties against 48,000. They had captured 75,000 small arms and 155 cannons. Since Fredericksburg, they had been in winter quarters, where their time had been taken up with regimental snowball fights and an army-wide religious revival. But they were ready to march and fight when the time came.

Soon, no doubt, after the roads dried out.

Their commander was, like Lincoln, aware of the "arithmetic" of this war, and he knew that it worked inexorably against him. He also knew that his army could be starved into submission. In March, he had detached

some of his best troops under one of his senior and most-trusted generals, James Longstreet, on an expedition to procure supplies—hams, bacon, preserved fish, corn—for his hungry soldiers. This risked having fewer troops at hand when Hooker made his inevitable move. But Lee had no choice.

Which is not to say that he had no strategy. Lee's insight was simple and clear. He could not last in a contest that came down to a series of battles like those he had fought already. To win, he needed a victory of annihilation. An American Cannae would demonstrate to the enemy the futility of continuing the fight. Bringing about such a battle and winning it would call for audacity and a willingness to take both the offensive and very long risks. He'd shown, already, that he was willing to take such risks, as, for instance, when he divided his army in the face of the enemy before Second Manassas. He was looking for a similar opportunity when he led his army into Maryland and was forced into a long-odds defensive battle at Antietam. In a letter to his secretary of war, after Fredericksburg, he made it clear that he wanted a rematch, on his own terms.

“Should Hooker's army assume the defensive, the readiest method of relieving the pressure . . . would be for this army to cross into Maryland.”

It would mean giving Hooker the slip. And that maneuver would have to wait until Longstreet completed his resupply operation. But, in this rare case, Lee's enemy got the jump on him.

Hooker had conceived a sound plan for the annihilation of Lee, by dividing his army as the Rebel commander had so often done. He marched more than half his army upstream on the Rappahannock, forded that river and its tributary, the Rapidan, and put himself to Lee's left and rear. He left the remainder of his army across from Fredericksburg but soon began moving those troops across the river on pontoon bridges under cover of artillery. Both wings of his divided army were larger than Lee's forces on the hills above Fredericksburg, known as Marye's Heights.

Once Hooker had all of his units in place, Lee would have to fight and be crushed between the two Union forces or retreat toward Richmond, moving into exposed and open ground where he could be destroyed.

It was very ably done. The troops had been well supplied; the marches had been brisk and orderly. These soldiers had been hardened by two years of war. They were not the naïfs who had gone out from Washington to fight the battle of First Manassas, strolling as though on their way to an afternoon picnic when, that is, they weren't tying up the roads in knots of disorganized, badly led, rookie soldiers. Hooker's army moved efficiently and professionally, and the general was well satisfied.

This was on April 30. Five days later: Hooker was back on the other side of the river, defeated—and in some instances, routed—by a force less than half the size of his.

Union troops, many of whom Hooker had *not* put into the fight, reacted with something like bewilderment. They did not understand how this could have happened. One wrote in a journal:

I have nothing to say about it in any way. I have no opinions to express about the Gen'l's or the men nor do I wish to. I leave it in the hands of God. I don't want to think of it at all.

The answer to their bewilderment was simple enough: They were not outfought, just outgeneraled.

Lee was asleep in his quarters when the first shots of the battle were fired. They came from downstream, where Union troops had crossed the river on pontoon bridges. He dozed for a while, then was awakened by Stonewall Jackson's aide.

“You want me to send a message to your good general, Captain?” Lee said. “Tell him that I am sure he knows what to do. I will meet him at the front very soon.”

Lee might have retreated, and some students of the battle say that would have been the best course. He could have found a better place to fight a great Napoleonic battle of annihilation, closer to Richmond. On the North Anna River, perhaps.

But he did not retreat.

His subordinates were, at first, unsure whether the enemy's main effort would come from the troops upstream or those who had crossed below Fredericksburg. As his staff debated the issue, Lee studied the positions established by the troops who had crossed on pontoons, then closed his binoculars and said, "The main attack will come from above."

This ended the discussion, and with Jackson and his troops, Lee rode to meet that attack.

Union troops were in Chancellorsville, a crossroads of no consequence in country grown up in jack pine, scrub oak, and briars known, descriptively, as "the Wilderness" (where a year later a dreadful battle would be fought). Three or four miles further east, toward Fredericksburg and Lee's position, there was blessedly open ground. Hooker's divisions were moving toward it and were nearly there. Hooker's subordinates were impressed, for perhaps the first time in the war, by the way things were going according to plan.

In the afternoon, some federal columns ran into resistance of the sort that might be called "stiff." Their generals, however, felt confident they could handle it.

But they were ordered to turn back and take up defensive positions around Chancellorsville. Hooker's generals were stunned by the order and sent someone to the rear to protest it. The messenger returned saying the order stood. Fall back. One of Hooker's generals considered outright disobedience. They were so close. From the crest of the ridge to their front, they would be able to see open country.

"If he thinks he can't hold the top of a hill," said George Meade, "how does he expect to hold the bottom of it?"

Still, the various columns pulled back, as ordered, and set up a line of entrenchments around the clearing at Chancellorsville.

Hooker was still brimming with confidence. And he explained to one of his subordinates, "I've got Lee just where I want him."

The man listened and, as he later reported, "retired from his presence, with the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man."

Several times that day and into the evening, Hooker would say, as though reciting a mantra, "The Rebel army is now the legitimate property of the Army of the Potomac."

Meanwhile, to the east, in a clearing in the Wilderness, Lee and his most capable lieutenant, Stonewall Jackson, sat on a log studying maps and working out a solution to what seemed an insoluble problem: how to first wrest the initiative from Hooker, then go on the offensive, and finally annihilate the Union Army around Chancellorsville before turning to deal with the forces around Fredericksburg, where Lee had left a skeleton force under General Jubal Early to bluster and make noise so as to convince the Federals—who numbered some 50,000—that there were many thousands of them. Early, in truth, had only 14,000 under his command.

Lee went to the nub of the problem, saying, "How can we get at those people?"

Lee wanted to attack, which was always Jackson's preferred course. They had done the necessary reconnaissance and knew that the attack could not come on their right, where the Union lines were anchored against the river. Or in the center, where the Union was dug in and improving an already strong position. So, if it was to be at all, the attack would have to be on their left—the Union right—where it came to an end out in the Wilderness somewhere.

Lee's cavalry commander, General J.E.B. Stuart, had been scouting the Union line and he knew where it ended. More important, he had learned that the Union flank was "in the air." That is, not attached to any defensible terrain feature and not anchored on a strong formation facing away to the west. The Federal line simply petered out.

The attack would be made there. The rest of the night was spent on coming up with a route the Confederate infantry could take that would put them on Hooker's flank without his troops being aware of the movement. Confederate cavalry, Jackson's cartographer, and a local man who knew the roads had accomplished this by the

time the two commanders were awake. Again, they studied the map and Lee said, "General Jackson, what do you propose to do?"

"Go around here," Jackson said, indicating the route.

"What do you propose to make this movement with?"

"With my whole corps."

This took even Lee, whose calm was legendary, up short. Jackson would be riding off with 30,000 men and leaving him with around half that number. One of the firmest maxims of military theory holds that a general must not divide his forces in the presence of the enemy. Lee had done that already. Now, Jackson was proposing that he do it again.

Stonewall, though, knew his man and shared his conviction that only a great and successful battle of annihilation could win the war for the South. More tidy, tactical victories would run up against what Lincoln called "the arithmetic."

"Well, go on," Lee said.

The flank march took all day. It was late afternoon, going on evening, before Jackson had his men in formation as he wanted them, hidden by the thick, tangled growth of the Wilderness. The Union troops idling to their front had no idea. Their first hint came when quail, then deer, and then rabbits came boiling out of the scrub in alarm. The soldiers found this funny for a while. Then, Jackson's men were on them, filling the air with the sound of the Rebel yell, which Jackson had once called "the sweetest music I ever heard."

Hooker's right crumbled. Panicked men ran past his headquarters in Chancellorsville, on their way to the river where they might find safety on the other side. Union officers attempted to rally them and reposition other units to stand up to the assault.

Jackson's men pushed on with the fervor of soldiers who have beaten the enemy and are now in pursuit. The sun went down, and a fat orange moon rose and threw its weak, gloomy light over the battlefield.

"Press them," Jackson said, again and again, riding among the confused and increasingly disorganized troops, determined to finish what had been so splendidly begun and to get to the river and cut off the enemy's escape. Then, he and Lee would have their victory of annihilation. The arithmetic would be conquered.

In the confusion of the battle, perhaps four hours after Jackson had launched the attack, he became one of the battle's many casualties. He was hit in the arm by musket fire from some of his own men.

He was taken to the rear and the battle died down. The firing slackened, and men slept, if they could, on the ground and in the open. One man later recalled the "weird, plaintive notes of the whippoorwills" floating over the battlefield.

Jackson had done his worst, but Hooker was not beaten. Not, anyway, in the sense that he had fled the battlefield. The divided elements of his army still outnumbered the entirety of Lee's. He might still win this fight, and the war, if the troops around Fredericksburg could hit Lee in his rear and his new, shorter lines around Chancellorsville could hold. But he was, indeed, as his frustrated subordinate had surmised, "a whipped man."

Hooker retreated too far, gave up too much vital, dominating ground, lost both the initiative and the determination to get it back. Lee and Stuart were maneuvering their separate commands and pushing back their enemies with the aim of uniting the divided army at Chancellorsville and then destroying the remnants of Hooker's army that would be backed up against the river.

The junction of the armies was accomplished near mid-morning, and Lee rode into the clearing at Chancellorsville on his big, splendid horse. As one staff man later wrote, "One long, unbroken cheer, in which the feeble cry of those who lay helpless on the earth blended with the strong voices of those who still fought, rose high above the roar of battle and hailed the presence of the victorious chief."

Lee still had business to attend to. He chased the Union forces that had been at Fredericksburg and had moved to support Hooker back across the river. Then he prepared to do the same to Hooker.

But Hooker, once more, gave him the slip and got across the river before he could attack. Lee had another victory but not one that would invalidate the arithmetic. He had suffered 13,000 casualties to Hooker's 17,000. And, as Lincoln had pointed out, the armies could fight that battle again and again and eventually only the men in blue would be left standing. That was the arithmetic.

Still, it was hard on the president, who was described by one visitor as pacing his office and saying, over and over, "My God, my God. What will the country say? What will the country say?"

But the arithmetic remained on his side. And while Lee had won an improbable victory, which historians have called his "masterpiece," he also understood the arithmetic and was bitterly disappointed. By the missed opportunity, and even more by the fact that he no longer had the services of Stonewall Jackson, with whom it might be possible to defeat even arithmetic.

Jackson's arm was amputated, and he was moved to comfortable quarters and seemed to be recuperating before pneumonia struck. This was, often as not, a death sentence, and soon, Jackson's doctors were telling him to prepare himself. In his last hours, he tried to comfort his wife. Then, he slipped into delirium and was calling to his adjutant to "send in and see if there is higher ground back of Chancellorsville."

Sunday came, and Jackson said, "It is the Lord's day; my wish is fulfilled. I have always desired to die on Sunday." A few hours later he called out, "Order A. P. Hill to prepare for action. . . . Pass the infantry to the front. Tell Major Hawks—"

Then he seemed to let go, at last, of all that and said, "Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees."