

THE MARYLAND CAMPAIGN AND THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM

Strategic Context

Prospects for winning the Civil War seemed bleak for the United States in the late summer and early autumn of 1862. Everywhere advancing Confederate armies retook or at least threatened areas that Federal forces had captured earlier in the year: southern Missouri, northern Mississippi, middle Tennessee, central and eastern Kentucky, western Virginia (present-day West Virginia). Although these advances were not coordinated in a grand strategic offensive, they had the same practical effect of carrying the war to the Yankees all along the Western Front. To make matters worse, the Great Sioux Uprising in southwestern Minnesota in August, 1862, diverted troops, commanders, resources, and attention from the Civil War to protecting civilians on the Indian frontier.

Even more ominous was the Confederate onslaught in the Eastern Theater. Since assuming command of the Army of Northern Virginia on June 1, 1862, General Robert E. Lee had raised the Siege of Richmond, driven the Federal Army of the Potomac down to James River, trounced another Union army at the Second Battle of Bull Run, and virtually cleared the Old Dominion of Yankee forces by September 2.

Lee, however, felt it foolhardy to try to storm heavily fortified Washington, DC, and he lacked the resources to besiege the U.S. capital. Rather than simply await developments and hope to beat off the next Federal invasion – wherever and whenever it might come – Lee retained the strategic initiative that he had wrested from the Bluecoats in June. On September 4, he crossed the upper Potomac River to Frederick, MD. Simply keeping the strategic initiative was important in itself. So was carrying the war out of Virginia. Yet Lee had other objectives beyond these. He hoped to “liberate” Maryland, a slaveholding state that was thought to sympathize with the Confederacy. If the ensuing campaign went well, he could even carry the war into Union territory and damage the resources and railroads of Pennsylvania.

Operational Context

The campaign did not go well for Lee. For one thing, pro-Confederate Marylanders lived in the eastern part of the state, which the Yankees dominated. Western Maryland was pro-Union; few of its residents rose up to welcome and join their supposed liberators.

Then, too, as often happens in war, the enemy did not operate according to expectations but acted for its own advantage. For one thing, Federal garrisons at Martinsburg and Harper's Ferry did not escape into Pennsylvania but concentrated at Harper's Ferry. There they threatened Lee's already tenuous supply line through the Shenandoah Valley. Crossing into Maryland required him to shift his line of communications west of the Blue Ridge. Now Bluecoats at the ferry imperiled it.

He could not ignore such peril, so he sent six of his ten divisions to surround it from three directions and capture it. Meantime two other divisions massed at Hagerstown, and only one infantry division, screened by the cavalry division, held the passes through South Mountain.

Such scattering of forces was bold, audacious, even risky. It might have worked against a cautious foe, as Federal field commander MG George B. McClellan had repeatedly proved to be. This time, however, he advanced with uncharacteristic speed – another serious Southern miscalculation. He initially moved with only five and a half corps. Union authorities later begrudged him three more divisions, but the equivalent of three whole corps languished within the fortifications of Washington throughout the Maryland Campaign. President Lincoln's continuing concern that the Confederate not capture the capital compelled this diversion of forces. Even so, with six corps and a cavalry division, McClellan was now coming – and coming fast.

For all the generalship and strategic vision and operational agility which the opposing commanders displayed, it was a seemingly minor incident – really just a fluke – that re-oriented the entire campaign: yet another instance of how contingency affects operations. On September 13, in a former Confederate camp east of Frederick, two Indiana soldiers found Lee's General Order 191 (the so-called "Lost Order"), which prescribed Confederate movements against Harper's Ferry. Easily authenticated, the order revealed how Graycoat divisions were dispersed from Hagerstown to Martinsburg. McClellan moved swiftly to take advantage of this insight into enemy intentions.

By itself, however, moving would not produce victory; fighting was necessary. Heavy fighting raged for much of September 14 at Fox's and Turner's Gaps, as the Bluecoats forced the line of South Mountain despite desperate Confederate resistance. Farther south, however, the Union Left Wing under MG William B. Franklin, sent to save Harper's Ferry, moved so hesitantly that it did not capture Crampton's Gap until late in the day. That proved too late for the ferry, whose position grew ever more precarious throughout September 14. The following day, the 12,500 Yankees there surrendered to MG "Stonewall" Jackson – the largest surrender in U.S. history prior to the fall of Bataan in April, 1942.

The fall of Harper's Ferry emboldened Lee to remain in western Maryland. On September 15-16 he took position around Sharpsburg, west of Antietam Creek. Jackson joined him there on the 16th. McClellan's army, including two of Franklin's divisions, massed east of the creek, and some of it crossed upstream from Sharpsburg. One division from each army tangled in the North Woods on the afternoon of September 16. The stage was set for the big battle the following day – with about 40,000 Confederates around Sharpsburg, twice that many soldiers under McClellan to the east and north of them, and the Potomac River just a few miles in the Butternuts' rear.

Battle of Antietam

The battle began on the northern part of the field about dawn. On the Federal right, MG Joseph Hooker's I Corps attacked Jackson's Left Wing in Miller's Corn Field. Hooker inflicted devastating casualties on the Butternuts but was himself driven back by MG John B. Hood's counterattacking Confederates. The arriving Union XII Corps, in turn, pushed back Hood, only to be stopped near the Dunker Church. One division of the Federal II Corps drove more deeply into Butternut lines in the West Wood but was counterattacked from three sides and forced to flee.

Fighting now shifted to the middle part of the battlefield as the other two divisions of MG Edwin V. Sumner's II Corps attacked two brigades in the ready-made trench of the Sunken Road. The Graycoats repeatedly repulsed those assaults, but finally Sumner's troops overran the Sunken Road. The entire Confederate center now appeared vulnerable to Federal penetration. Lee's senior subordinate, MG James Longstreet, commanding his Right Wing, personally held his staff officers' horses as they helped fire two cannons to create a show of resistance there. What is so clear in hindsight was not at all clear to commanders on the ground, where the smoke of battle thickened the fog of war. Sumner considered his battered corps fought out and thought it too risky to send in Franklin's fresh corps. Moreover, McClellan, who remained east of the creek throughout the battle, was unwilling to commit his main reserve, the V Corps, to anything more than slight skirmishing near the Middle Bridge, where the main east-west road crossed the Antietam. Fighting in the center thus fizzled out into skirmishing and shelling.

The action now shifted to the southerly part of the field. All day McClellan had urged MG Ambrose E. Burnside to attack with his wing. Not until early afternoon did BG Jacob D. Cox's Union IX Corps finally advance. Two Georgia regiments stopped Cox's

feeble probes at Burnside's Bridge, but the Bluecoats finally stormed their position as another Union division crossed downstream from the bridge. Pursuing Federals approached the outskirts of Sharpsburg and appeared on the verge of rolling up the Confederate right. Just in the nick of time, MG A.P. Hill's division, arriving from Harper's Ferry, counterattacked and drove back the Unionists.

As night fell, fighting finally ceased. September 17, 1862, had proved the bloodiest day in American history, with some 12,400 Federal and 10,300 Confederate casualties. A Union corps commander and two Union division commanders lost their lives at Antietam, and another Union corps and division commander had been killed on September 14-15. The Southerners, too, lost three generals at Antietam and one at South Mountain.

Aftermath

Lee defiantly remained on the battlefield all day, September 18. McClellan, though reinforced by two fresh divisions, did not attack him. Overnight September 18-19, the Graycoats withdrew across the Potomac. McClellan's feeble pursuit to Shepherdstown was driven back across that river on September 20. Thereafter the two exhausted armies rested and refitted for over a month, the Southerners in the lower Shenandoah Valley and the Yankees around Sharpsburg. Not until late October did President Lincoln finally prod McClellan into advancing. That would be a new campaign (McClellan's last). By late September, the Maryland Campaign was over.

Results

The Maryland Campaign and the Battle of Antietam may be evaluated on many levels. Tactically, Confederates could claim conditional success at Antietam in that they had repeatedly foiled excellent Federal opportunities to destroy them.

That criterion is too narrow. Lee did not go to Maryland to save his army from disaster. He went there to liberate that state so it could join the Confederacy. He went there to build upon six weeks of unbroken strategic success that had carried him from the outskirts of Richmond to the Mason-Dixon Line. It is not too much to say he went there to win the war. On all of those broader operational and strategic levels, the Southerners fell short. Capturing Harper's Ferry, with its large garrison and armaments, was small consolation for losing the strategic initiative and losing the grand prize.

The Bluecoats can claim tactical success for remaining in possession of the battlefield at Antietam. Then, too, they can claim operational success for turning back the invasion of Maryland. They also enjoyed the strategic success of thwarting the broader Confederate objectives. On all three levels, such success was significant. Yet they could have achieved so much more. On all levels, unprecedented opportunity beckoned. Finding the Lost Order could have allowed McClellan to beat the Butternuts in detail and save Harper's Ferry. On September 14, he captured their mountain but not their army and lost the ferry the next day. Then at Antietam, McClellan's failure to coordinate all his forces and to commit his four reserve divisions gave Lee time to shift troops from one part of the battlefield to another and to stop the disjointed Union attacks. What could have been a battle of annihilation became a bloody stalemate.

Yet there is another level for evaluating Antietam which transcends all others. Federal success there, limited though it was, made President Lincoln think the time propitious to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. On September 22, he put out a preliminary proclamation promising to free all slaves inside Confederate lines as of January 1, 1863, if the war had not ended by then. The conflict did not end; he issued the full proclamation; and an entirely new moral dimension of human freedom was added to the Civil War.