

Letters from Union General George Gordon Meade

George Meade's failure to pursue Robert E. Lee after the Battle of Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg was fought in South-central Pennsylvania on July 1-3, 1863, ending in a great victory for George Meade's Union Army of the Potomac. On July 4, both armies remained on the battlefield yet did not engage in fighting, and on the following day Robert E. Lee began moving his Army of Northern Virginia south, back towards Virginia.

Although Meade had given the Union a much needed victory, he failed to vigorously pursue Lee's retreating forces. This lack of aggressive action drew criticism from Lincoln, who was constantly frustrated during the war by his general's inability to destroy or capture entire southern armies.

The following documents are letters written by Meade and Union General-in-Chief Henry Halleck during the two-week period following the battle. As you read, look for Meade's reasons for using caution against Lee, and notice Halleck's strategies for motivating Meade.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to Henry Wager Halleck, July 5, 1863

July 5, 1863.

Major General Halleck,

The enemy retired under cover of the night and heavy rain in the direction of Fairfield and Cashtown. All my available Cavalry are in pursuit on the enemy's left and rear. My movement will be made at once on his flank via Middletown and South Mountain Pass. I cannot give you the details of our capture in prisoners, colors and arms. Upwards of twenty battle flags will be turned in from one Corps. I cannot delay to pick up the debris of the battle field and request that all those arrangements may be made by the Departments. My wounded, with those of the enemy in our hands, will be left at Gettysburg. After burying our own, I am compelled to employ citizens to bury the enemy's dead. My Head-Quarters will be to-night at Cregerstown. Communication received from Gen. Smith, in command of 3,000 men, on the march from Carlisle towards Cashtown. Field returns last evening give me about 55,000 effectives in the ranks, exclusive of Cavalry, baggage guards, ambulance attendants, etc. Every available reinforcement is required and should be sent to Frederick without delay.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to John Sedgwick, July 6, 1863

July 6, 1863, 2 A. M.

Comm. Off. 6th Corps.

After conversation with General Warren, [1] I think under existing circumstances you had better push your reconnaissance so as to ascertain, if practicable, how far the enemy has retreated, and also the character of the Gap, and practicability of carrying the same. In case I should determine to advance on that line, you must be careful and watch your right and rear as roads from Cashtown all open to the enemy to advance against you. My cavalry sent to Cashtown have not reported, but I have reason to believe that the enemy is there in force. I beg you will keep me fully advised of what occurs, and I desire you will report at least every two or three hours. Both the 1st and 3rd Corps are under your orders, and can be called to your support if you require them. I shall not move the army from its present position until I am better satisfied the enemy are evacuating the Cumberland Valley.

Letter from Henry Wager Halleck to George Gordon Meade, July 7, 1863

July 7, 8.45 P. M.

You have given the enemy a stunning blow at Gettysburg, follow it up and give him another before he can cross the Potomac. When he crosses circumstances will determine whether it will be best to pursue him by the Shenandoah Valley or this side of Blue Ridge. There is strong evidence that he is short of Artillery ammunition and if vigorously pressed he must suffer.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to Henry Wager Halleck, July 8, 1863

July 8, 1863, 2 P. M.

Gen'l Conch learns from scouts that the train is crossing at Williams port very slowly. So long as the river is unfordable the enemy cannot cross. My cavalry report that they had a fight near Funkstown, through which they drove the enemy to Hagerstown where a large infantry force was [...]. From all I can gather the enemy extends from Hagerstown to Williamsport [...] the march of their trains. Their cavalry and infantry pickets are advanced to the Hagerstown and Sharpsburg pike, on the general line of the Antietam. We hold Boonshoro, and our pickets, four miles in front, toward Hagerstown, are in contact with the enemy's pickets. My Army is assembling slowly; the rains of yesterday and last [...] have made all roads but pikes almost impassable. Artillery and wagons are stalled; it will take time to collect them together. A large portion of the men are

barefooted. Shoes will arrive at Frederick today and will be issued as soon as possible. The spirit of the Army is high; the men are ready and willing to make any exertion to push forward. The very first moment I can get the different commands, the artillery and cavalry, properly supplied and in hand I will, move forward. Be assured I most earnestly desire to try the fortunes of war with the enemy on this side of the river, hoping, through Providence and the bravery of my men to settle the question, but I should be wrong not to frankly tell you of the difficulties encountered. I expect to find the enemy in a strong position, well covered with artillery, and I do not desire to imitate his example at Gettysburg and assault a position when the chances are so greatly against success. I wish in advance to moderate the expectation of those who; in ignorance of the difficulties to be encountered, may expect too much. All that I can do under the circumstances, I pledge this Army to do.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to Henry Wager Halleck, July 8, 1863

July 8, 1863, 3 P. M.

My information as to the crossing of the enemy does not agree with that just received in your dispatch. His whole force is in position between Funkstown and Williamsport. I have just received information [p. 309] that he has driven in my cavalry force in front of Boonsboro. My Army is and has been making forced marches, short of rations and barefooted. Our Corps marched yesterday and last night over 30 miles. I take occasion to repeat that I will use my utmost efforts to push forward this Army.

Letter from Henry Wager Halleck to George Gordon Meade, July 8, 1863

July 8, 5 P. M.

Do not understand me as expressing any dissatisfaction. On the contrary your Army has done most nobly. I only wish to give you opinions formed from information received here. It is telegraphed from near Harpers Ferry that the enemy have been crossing for the last two days. It is also reported that they have a bridge across. If Lee's Army is divided by the river the importance of attacking the part on this side is incalculable -- such an opportunity may never occur again. If on the contrary he has massed his whole force on the Antietam, time must be taken to also concentrate your forces -- Your opportunities for information are better than mine. Brig. Gen. Kelly was ordered some days ago to concentrate at Hancock and attack the enemy's right. Maj. Gen. Brooks is also moving from Pittsburgh to reinforce Kelly. All troops arriving from New York and Fort Monroe are sent directly to Harpers Ferry unless you order differently. You will have forces sufficient to render your victory certain. My only fear now is that the enemy may escape by crossing the river.

Letter from Henry Wager Halleck to George Gordon Meade, July 14, 1863

I need hardly say to you that the escape of Lee's army without another battle has created great dissatisfaction, in the mind of the President, and it will require an active and energetic pursuit on your part to remove the impression that it has not been sufficiently active heretofore.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to Henry Wager Halleck, July 14, 1863

Having performed my duty conscientiously and to the best of my ability, the censure of the President conveyed in your dispatch of 1 P. M. this day, is, in my judgment, so undeserved that I feel compelled most respectfully to ask to be immediately relieved from the command this army.

Letter from Henry Wager Halleck to George Gordon Meade, July 14, 1863

My telegram stating the disappointment of the President at the escape of Lee's army was not intended as a censure, but as a stimulus to an active pursuit. It is not deemed a sufficient cause for your application to be relieved.

Letter from George Gordon Meade to Margaretta Sergeant Meade, July 16, 1863

Headquarters Army of the Potomac,

Berlin, Md., July 16, 1863.

I wrote to you of the censure put on me by the President, through General Halleck, because I did not bag General Lee, and of the course I took on it. I don't know whether I informed you of Halleck's reply, that his telegram was not intended as a censure, but merely "to spur me on to an active pursuit," which I consider more offensive than the original message; for no man who does his duty, and all that he can do, as I maintain I have done, needs *spurring*. It is only the laggards and those who fail to do all they can do who require spurring. They have refused to relieve me, but insist on my continuing to try to do what I know in advance it is impossible to do. My army (men and animals) is exhausted; it wants rest and reorganization; it has been greatly reduced and weakened by recent operations, and no reinforcements of any practical value have been sent. Yet, in the face of all these facts, well known to them, I am urged, pushed and *spurred* to attempting to pursue and destroy an army nearly equal to my own, falling back upon its resources and reinforcements, and increasing its *morale* daily. This has been the history of all my predecessors, and I clearly saw that in time their fate would be mine. This was

the reason I was disinclined to take the command, and it is for this reason I would gladly give it up.

I consider the New York riots very formidable and significant. I have always expected the crisis of this revolution to turn on the attempt to execute the conscription act and at present things look very unfavorable.

Questions:

1. What are Meade's reasons for not aggressively pursuing Lee?
2. How does Meade seem to feel about his performance at Gettysburg?
3. Why does Halleck want Meade to pursue Lee?
4. What is Meade's reaction to criticism from Halleck and Lincoln?
5. In the final document, Meade writes to his wife. What is the purpose of the letter? What do you learn about Meade in this letter?