Key Moments in the Civil War
By
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"Just an old man's opinion"

Many good folks delve into the key moments of the Civil War. It can be a way of second guessing and pondering what ifs.

As I used to tell my students: What I am about to deliver should in no way be considered an answer to anything. It is however; an attempt to create a question. We second guess, that is human nature. It is very easy to take a hindsight approach. This essay does not attempt to study all of the critical junctures in the Civil War, just a few--And hopefully this essay will provoke questions. To believe that I have the right to come up with a definitive answer to all of the nineteenth century problems in warfare would be an effort in futility and an exercise in stupidity.

The people is never in the right as soon as it begins to revolt. This is a fact, and when I speak of people I refer to the constituents of a government, thus the word is instead of are. This is a fact when it came to Lincoln's perception of the people and also his perception of a government under revolt. When creating a new government, it is important not to tie one's hands by laws that are too detailed. Constitutions are the work of time, and it is impossible to leave too wide an opening for improvements. Lincoln understood this, and Davis did not. With this understanding Lincoln also knew that Laws are like the statues of certain divinities which are veiled on certain occasions.

One of the first key moments of the war was found in the security of the border states and the long wide, rolling transportation conduits known as the Ohio, Tennessee, Cumberland and Mississippi Rivers. These were the grand prizes that would either spell defeat or victory in the eyes of the people who held them.

Also key political land masses were important. It seems likely that Maryland would have followed Virginia into the Confederacy had not Lincoln veiled certain statues in that divinity called the United States Constitution. Not only a key moment, but critical moment in time. Arrests were made, fear of the government was made an issue, and Maryland was held.

There were many reasons for securing the border states...too many to list here. Here are a few, maybe not the most important, but enough to hopefully create a flow of imaginative juices known as what ifs. The border states were just that...border. They had border line politics, border line beliefs, they had commitment to differing ideals, and they were certainly the prize of whichever government knew how to bring them into the fold. The border states produced probably as many soldiers for the North as they did for the South. Although a nice prize, those men would have and did join their respective armies because of their own personal beliefs, they were not the prize. The prize was geography. Lincoln understood this better than anyone.

Geography--the Ohio River, the key to the Mississippi and the eventual key to the war. The South gave it little emphasis until it was too late. The North made it the grand prize. It should be noted that Lincoln, the great manipulator, had created an idea in the hearts and minds of the people in the North and the South-- the belief that Richmond was the main focus. He knew as well as anyone that the South could still fight without Richmond. He knew they would eventually perish without the Mississippi or the Ohio.

Virginia is only about one hundred miles from Lake Erie. The thoroughfare from Maryland to the Great Lakes could have produced a portion of the Anaconda Plan in reverse. President
Lincoln's maneuvers in securing the border states were as sound as any flank march that was attributed to Stonewall Jackson.

Second Key Point: Gettysburg: If the art of war were nothing but the art of avoiding risks, glory would become the prey of mediocre minds. Lee came onto a field he did not want, and had no knowledge of. But the enemy was there and so were the risks. There are many key points during the battle of Gettysburg that will be rehashed until the end of time. "If Ewell would have only advanced and taken the hills." "If Longstreet would have moved his corps with celerity the second day's assault would have produced a great victory." "If Lee would not have ordered Picketts' charge, his army would have been preserved to take the offensive another day." And I am certain there are others.

If Ewell would have advanced and would have taken the hills...what then? The Gettysburg line would have fallen. The Pipe Creek line would have been solidified. The Army of Northern Virginia could have either circled to the east and north and presented itself in a strong defensive position between the Federal army and Washington (this was still an option at the end of the first day at Gettysburg). Or...the enemy was on the Pipe Creek line in a weakened state having lost two corps of troops. An assault on a well established defensive line near Pipe Creek may have produced the same results that were produced at Gettysburg. Would Lee have swung to the east and north as Longstreet wanted? Or would he have went after the Federal army at Pipe Creek? What if?

On the Second Day. What if? Men take only their needs into consideration never their abilities. On the Second day of Gettysburg Longstreet faced a problem in command that is not unlike officers of an earlier day and those of a later day. Having been given orders he did not believe would prove successful; he hesitated, and historians and time are very unforgiving. Had he progressed with enthusiasm and celerity...then what? Could he have pierced the line? Then changing front, rolled up the Federal line? But what about the Federal Fifth Corps? or the Sixth Corps? Where were they? Could they have destroyed Longstreet at the moment of seemed victory? What if he would have taken the hills--and perceiving the Fifth and Sixth Corps coming in on his flank and rear he would have held the hills and not advanced? What if Sickles would have obeyed orders and had not advanced? Would the Confederate onslaught proved victorious? "The mistakes of our enemies often are more useful to them than their abilities and cause us to commit mistakes still greater than theirs (Napoleon Bonaparte)" Sickles' advance was a mistake. It caused a still greater mistake in the ranks of the Confederate army in the progression of events.

Pickett's charge...when had Lee's instincts failed him? There is a moment in every battle at which the least maneuver is decisive and gives superiority. Had that moment happened? If he had not charged would he be crucified by historians and time as Ewell and Longstreet. He who fears to lose his reputation is sure to lose it. War consists of nothing but accidents and a commander, though he must always adjust himself to general principles, should never overlook anything that might enable him to exploit these accidents. Some would call this luck, but in fact it is the characteristic of genius. Lee had an instinct for finding Federal accidents, he had to try. However; what if?

True character always pierces through in moments of crisis. There are sleepers whose awakening is terrifying--The attack of the First Minnesota, the courage of Cushing, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain on Little Round Top, Buford on Seminary Ridge, Hancock reorganizing on the first day, the ability of Meade to change his well-conceived Pipe Creek plans based on Hancock's report...the list goes on and on.

The last key moment for this essay would be the actions in the western theater more
specifically the fall of Vicksburg and thus the fall of the Mississippi River. Vicksburg fell in July of 1863, and with it most of the hopes of a successful war effort for the South.

The seeds of this monumental disaster were sowed in the first few months of 1862, when the South failed to achieve enough success in Kentucky. The fall of Kentucky was tantamount in that it gave the Federal forces the Ohio River. The Federal philosophy of river warfare and the Confederate conception was very much apart. The North created gunboats, the South placed their chances of victory in fortified positions along the river. The South put all of their eggs in one basket. A fort could possibly hold out for a long time, and expend a great deal of enemy energy...but once it fell it gave up large expanses of river.

The fall of Vicksburg could be easily blamed on Joe Johnston's failure to relieve Pemberton. It could be given to Bragg for not stopping Rosecrans. It could be given to Davis for issuing impossible orders to Pemberton. It could be given to an outdated belief that fixed fortifications can withstand the onslaught of an invading army. There were many reasons why Vicksburg was lost to the Confederacy. 1. Losing the Ohio River, and New Orleans (both flanks had been turned) That in itself is a defensive disaster on a large scale. 2. The failure of the offensive to take the Tennessee River with the eventual defeat at Shiloh, and the retreat from Murfreesboro gave the Federal armies free reign along the rivers leading to the Mississippi. Was it at this critical time that all armies operating in the west should have been consolidated into one powerful force with a singular offensive target? Losing Forts Henry and Donelson...and New Orleans should have raised a very large red flag in the war department in Richmond--It is axiomatic in the art of war that the side which remains behind its fortified line is always defeated. Experience and theory agree on that point.

Alas, by the time if got down to blaming Johnston for not supporting from Jackson, and Bragg not supporting from the vicinity of Chattanooga the Battle and siege of Vicksburg had already been decided. And with the fall of the Mississippi, the entire Confederacy was not far behind.

Every offensive war is invasion warfare; every well conducted war is methodical warfare. Defensive warfare does not exclude attacking, nor does offensive warfare exclude defensive fighting, although its aim is to force the frontier and to invade the enemy's country. What distinguishes successful commanders from less successful ones is not the cleverness of maneuver but the ability to bring about a bold action. In the advance on Vicksburg, Grant's supply line was nearly destroyed by the cleverness of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Earl van Dorn, his response was foraging and confiscation of food...and possibly the boldest move of the war from either side...not just the movement on Vicksburg, but how he did it.---Again just an old man's opinion.

Source: From the papers of the late Dr. Ernest Butner

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