

**LOST TRIUMPH
LEE'S REAL PLAN AT GETTYSBURG – AND WHY IT FAILED¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR TIMOTHY P. HAYES, JR.²

*Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan.*³

Lost Triumph is a new take on an old story. In a highly readable book, Tom Carhart establishes the very bold premise that Pickett's Charge on day three at Gettysburg was not a foolhardy last gasp by a commander with his back to the wall. Instead, it was part of a complex and brilliant plan that, if executed to perfection, would have resulted in a stunning and monumental victory for the Confederate Army under General Robert E. Lee. Perhaps even more controversial is Professor Carhart's theory that Brigadier General George Armstrong Custer of Little Bighorn fame thwarted the plan.⁴ Professor Carhart relies on primary sources wherever possible, but also depends on many secondary sources that he admits are pure conjecture in some instances.⁵ While perhaps not lending credence to his theory, these supplements are plausible and make the book a fascinating read for a student of military history.

Professor Carhart's theory in *Lost Triumph* is easily summarized. Pickett's Charge, the fabled "High Water Mark of the Confederacy,"⁶ was merely a "massive distraction."⁷ Coupled with that distraction was to be a renewed offensive by General Richard Ewell's 2nd Confederate Corps on the Union right. This offensive was in fact initiated by contact with the enemy ahead of schedule. But the presently forgotten or

¹ TOM CARHART, *LOST TRIUMPH, LEE'S REAL PLAN AT GETTYSBURG – AND WHY IT FAILED* (2005).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ James M. McPherson, *Foreword* to TOM CARHART, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

⁴ General Custer is most well-known for his leadership in the massacre at Little Bighorn, Montana, in 1876. He died there along with several hundred of his men, in what was later dubbed, "Custer's Last Stand." For more information on this battle, see National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/libi/> (last visited Nov. 28, 2005).

⁵ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 176.

⁶ This phrase has been in common usage since shortly after the end of the Civil War. There is a monument bearing this moniker on the battlefield at the point where some of Pickett's men momentarily breached the Union line.

⁷ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 4.

unknown stroke of genius was a planned cavalry charge led by General J.E.B. (Jeb) Stuart into the heart of the Union rear, meeting Pickett at the center of the Union line and effectively cutting the Union Army in half, then destroying it gradually. Professor Carhart boldly asserts that this plan was thwarted only by George Armstrong Custer's "raw personal courage".⁸

Professor Carhart's book has a clearly defined purpose—to advance his theory—and his story is tightly woven to support that goal. He anticipates and attempts to answer the reader's most obvious questions: where is the evidence of Lee's plan, and why is it only now coming to light? Professor Carhart readily admits that he does not rely on any newly discovered evidence, but bases his theory on his own interpretation of existing sources,⁹ most notably eyewitness sources collected in the *Bachelor* papers.¹⁰ While noting that there were only two Confederate reports of the cavalry battle between Stuart and Custer in the official reports,¹¹ Professor Carhart asserts that General Lee suppressed confederate reports of that aspect of the fight¹² because they revealed that Jeb Stuart's invincible cavalry had been held off by a much smaller force. Such a revelation would have been devastating for confederate morale and a much needed boost to Union spirits. Professor Carhart surmises that, rather than allow the proliferation of this news, Lee preferred to shoulder the blame himself.¹³ But, of course, he could not control the Union reports. So why were they ignored? Professor Carhart cites ample anecdotal evidence of the cavalry prong of the attack provided by Union cavalymen in various journals and articles, but he maintains that these reports were regarded by historians as mere puffery, and ignored.¹⁴ He does, however, acknowledge two previous historians who espoused his theory in works of larger scope.¹⁵ Critics, however,

⁸ *Id.* at 6.

⁹ *Id.* at 5.

¹⁰ *Id.* (referencing 1-3 THE BACHELDER PAPERS: GETTYSBURG IN THEIR OWN WORDS (1994-1995)).

¹¹ There were seventeen federal reports of the battle. See CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 241 (citing THE WAR OF THE REBELLION: A COMPILATION OF THE OFFICIAL RECORDS OF THE UNION AND CONFEDERATE ARMIES (1889)).

¹² CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 242.

¹³ *Id.* at 245.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 252.

¹⁵ *Id.* (citing JAMES M. MCPHERSON, BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM (1989) and STEPHEN Z. STARR, THE UNION CAVALRY IN THE CIVIL WAR (1979)).

tend to agree that Professor Carhart is the first to offer a comprehensive interpretation of this theory.¹⁶

Professor Carhart offers other support for his theory as well. First, he proposes that this grandiose plan was in keeping with General Lee's overall boldness in battle,¹⁷ although it could be argued that an unsupported Pickett's charge would have been even bolder. But tactically, Professor Carhart argues, Lee would not have attacked with only Pickett's Division, as it amounted to only twenty percent of his available forces.¹⁸ Professor Carhart also points to Lee's unflinching loyalty to his subordinates, and notes that Lee would have been particularly loathe to disparage Stuart's name following his combat-related death ten months after Gettysburg.¹⁹ To explain why there is no evidence in the form of written orders predating the battle, Professor Carhart insists that General Lee was far too secretive to publish his orders in writing.²⁰ And, as historian James McPherson notes in the foreword to *Lost Triumph*, a success will attract scores of supporters eager to be associated with the victory, but survivors will quickly distance themselves from a defeat.²¹ In the end, Professor Carhart frankly admits that his assessment is "unfortunately meaningless" because the plan ultimately failed.²² While this may be true from a historical perspective, it does not negate the fact that Professor Carhart has made a valuable contribution to Gettysburg literature, and no doubt sparked renewed debate about the strategies and tactics that were employed.

In *Lost Triumph*, Tom Carhart occasionally exceeds the scope of his thesis. For example, the first chapter discusses General Lee's actions in the Mexican War. While underscoring the well-known effectiveness of a younger Lee in battle, this chapter does little to advance his theory of the Gettysburg battle and is filled with conjectural narrative.²³ The next chapter is even less useful, as it attempts an unnecessary history lesson

¹⁶ See, e.g., Tom Carhart, Author, Additional Praise for *Lost Triumph* (Bruce Lee ("Lost Triumph presents the first comprehensive view of Lee's previously unknown plan to win the battle.") and James McPherson ("No historian before Carhart has pieced together the whole story . . .")), <http://www.tomcarhart.net/books.htm> (last visited Nov. 28, 2005).

¹⁷ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 268.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 148, 150.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 268.

²⁰ *Id.* at 246.

²¹ *Id.* at xiii.

²² *Id.* at 267.

²³ See, e.g., *id.* at 7.

about the period between the Mexican and Civil Wars. The reader is left to wonder what effect the Wilmot Proviso or the oratory of Stephen Douglas had on the battle at Gettysburg, or more specifically, Lee's strategy there. Carhart assumes little knowledge of the Civil War or the antebellum period in these early chapters, which unfortunately causes the book to lose focus at that point.

Professor Carhart begins to tie the narrative into his theory when he discusses Lee's tenure as superintendent of West Point. He notes that Lee studied the tactical brilliance of Napoleon as both a student and superintendent of the Academy.²⁴ He also states that Lee read Jomini's works on attacking an enemy that was fixed in place,²⁵ as the Union army was at Gettysburg. Professor Carhart bases the latter assertion on the fact that Lee owned a copy of Jomini's book, although it was in French and mere ownership does not necessarily indicate study. But here the reader should consider the author's background. As a former West Point cadet himself, Professor Carhart is intimately familiar with the curriculum at the Academy and undoubtedly studied Jomini himself. He is clearly well versed in military history, as chapter four illustrates.²⁶ Professor Carhart examines the battles of Cannae, Leuthen, and Austerlitz—battles he asserts that Lee also studied—and finds strategies in each battle that he argues Lee incorporated into his secret Gettysburg plan. Professor Carhart goes on to describe the tactics and equipment of the three combat arms involved in the battle at Gettysburg—infantry, cavalry, and artillery. His description does little to advance his theory but reinforces to the reader Carhart's firm grasp of the military art and science.

It is not until chapter six that Professor Carhart begins to examine the Civil War period, and here he focuses on early displays of bravery and prowess by Custer²⁷ and Stuart.²⁸ Earlier in the book, Carhart makes interesting references to the prior encounters between Lee and Stuart, as respective superintendent and student at West Point²⁹ and at Harper's

²⁴ *Id.* at 34.

²⁵ *Id.* at 35.

²⁶ In addition to his West Point education, Professor Carhart is a twice-wounded Vietnam veteran, has a Ph.D. in history, a law degree, has authored four books, and is a university professor. See Penguin Group, http://www.penguinputnam.com/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,0_1000037675,00.html (last visited Nov. 28, 2005).

²⁷ See CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 176.

²⁸ See *id.* at 90.

²⁹ *Id.* at 31 (noting that Lee treated Stuart like a son).

Ferry.³⁰ Before he discusses the events at Gettysburg, Professor Carhart examines in some detail the battle at Chancellorsville in an attempt to bolster his theory. He makes two analogies between the two battles. First, he argues that because General Stonewall Jackson's movements and success at Chancellorsville were due to Lee's orders,³¹ Stuart's movement to the Union rear at Gettysburg resulted from Lee's order as well. This is a plausible assumption, though no written orders exist, as Lee was the senior tactical commander on the field in both instances. Professor Carhart's second analogy requires a greater logical leap. He compares Lee's actions at Chancellorsville with Napoleon's actions at Arcola versus Alvinzky.³² Professor Carhart asserts that because Lee borrowed from Napoleon's strategy at Chancellorsville, he likely implemented a Napoleonic plan at Gettysburg as well. While Napoleonic tactics probably influenced Lee, given that Lee had devoted his adult life to the art of warfare, Professor Carhart perhaps assumes too much. While one can compare the similarities between the two generals, one can never know if Lee made a conscious decision to duplicate any specific strategy or tactic because no evidence of such a decision exists. It is safer to say that these battles likely shaped Lee's thinking and experience.

When Professor Carhart finally moves into the battle at Gettysburg, he initially focuses on the relationship between Lee and one of his corps commanders, General James Longstreet. Lee allegedly promised Longstreet that Lee would only fight in the tactical defensive in a campaign into the North despite being on the offensive strategically, but reneged on this vow at Gettysburg.³³ This cuts against Professor Carhart's theory that Lee's plan was brilliantly conceived, but poorly executed. Professor Carhart posits that Pickett's Charge, a frontal assault by Pickett's Division in the center of the Union line, unfolded only because Longstreet had disobeyed an order by Lee to attack earlier that morning on the Union left flank.³⁴ If this is so, the Pickett's Charge prong of the attack occurred more by happenstance than by preconceived

³⁰ *Id.* at 37.

³¹ *Id.* at 96.

³² *See id.* at 97-105.

³³ *Id.* at 125. *See also* JEFFREY D. WERT, GENERAL JAMES LONGSTREET, THE CONFEDERACY'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL SOLDIER 257 (1993) (Wert stating that Longstreet did not *expect* a tactical offensive and *believed* that Lee was committed to the defense) (emphasis added).

³⁴ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 168-171.

design,³⁵ although the evidence is clear that part of Longstreet's Corps would attack somewhere on the Union line that day. But Professor Carhart appears to assert in this chapter that if Longstreet had not disobeyed Lee's order, Pickett never would have met Stuart in the center of the Union line. This assertion seems to undercut his thesis, unless Professor Carhart is to have the reader believe that Lee concocted an intricately detailed plan that afternoon, as soon as Lee learned of Longstreet's failure to attack.

Professor Carhart notes that Longstreet once again objected to his commander's plan, and surmises that his objection was because Longstreet was unaware that Stuart's cavalry would be conducting a simultaneous attack against the Union rear.³⁶ A cynic would argue that was because no such plan existed. Perhaps Lee did not feel the need to explain himself or his strategy, but it seems that Lee would have disclosed that information to Longstreet if it were true.³⁷

In fairness to Professor Carhart, there is ample evidence to support his thesis as well, including the aforementioned Official Reports³⁸ of the battle, the memoirs of Major Henry McClellan of Stuart's staff,³⁹ and, perhaps most compelling, Stuart's own after action report of the battle.⁴⁰ Professor Carhart's theory is plausible, despite the gaps in reasoning. He is extremely well-versed in military history as is evidenced in his recitations of previous momentous battles,⁴¹ his knowledge of period weaponry,⁴² and his assessment of tactical decision-making.⁴³

Lost Triumph is well organized, both logically and chronologically. Professor Carhart writes in clear and passionate prose, which makes the

³⁵ There is also evidence opposing this view. See, e.g., THOMAS B. BUELL, *THE WARRIOR GENERALS, COMBAT LEADERSHIP IN THE CIVIL WAR* 232 (1997).

³⁶ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 171.

³⁷ Perhaps even more disturbingly, this lack of disclosure, if the plan was carried out successfully, would have resulted in friendly troops unexpectedly converging on the objective, which could have had disastrous consequences. Carhart does not acknowledge this potential effect when defending his theory.

³⁸ *THE WAR OF THE REBELLION: A COMPILATION OF THE OFFICIAL RECORDS OF THE UNION AND CONFEDERATE ARMIES* (1889).

³⁹ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 174 (citing H.B. MCCLELLAN, *I RODE WITH JEB STUART* (1958) (wherein McClellan refers to the plan to attack the Union rear)).

⁴⁰ CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 197, 198.

⁴¹ See, e.g., *id.* at 156.

⁴² See, e.g., *id.* at 206.

⁴³ See, e.g., *id.* at 153.

book an enjoyable read. Other than the previously noted deficiencies, the author works to examine and rationalize the counterpoints to his arguments in a balanced approach. *Lost Triumph*, although devoid of photographs or illustrations, provides adequate and relevant maps of the various battles to demonstrate the author's points. Professor Carhart frequently refers to both period and present terrain and vegetation surrounding the Gettysburg battlefield, and photographs to illustrate these points would have been useful.

Taken as a whole, Professor Carhart's book is well researched, tightly focused, and an exciting read. *Lost Triumph*, while a welcome addition to any historian's civil war library, is of particular interest to military officers. Perhaps unintentionally, Professor Carhart underscores the point that even a flawlessly conceived and executed plan, supported with appropriate resources, can be defeated by an enemy combatant commander who possesses the timeless Army value of personal courage.⁴⁴ Custer's stand against Stuart's cavalry is a perfect example. It is an apt reminder to military officers in a time of war that personal courage when leading subordinates can make the difference in a battle or campaign and can even change the course of history. *Lost Triumph* is a must-read for military officers and Civil War aficionados, and neither faction will be disappointed.

⁴⁴ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 22-100, ARMY LEADERSHIP 2-34 (31 Aug. 1999).