

### Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg û and Why It Failed

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## Review

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**Carhart, Tom** *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg û And Why It Failed*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, \$25.95 hardcover ISBN 399152490

### An Overarching Stratagem

#### The Confederate Battle Plan at Gettysburg

Will the battle of Gettysburg never cease to fascinate us? Is there a student or historian of the Civil War û dead, alive or yet to be born û who hasn't, doesn't or will not dream of writing some new breakthrough study on the so-called Highwater Mark of the Confederacy? In William Faulkner's 1948 whimsy about Gettysburg in **Intruder in the Dust**, there isn't a fourteen-year old Southern boy alive for whom it remains just before two p.m. on that fateful third day of the battle with all the guns laid, Pickett ready with his legion, everything awaiting Longstreet to give the word. Its all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin, suggested the famed Mississippi literary genius. Retired army colonel Tom Carhart fulfills this wishful thinking at its best. His new study suggests that Robert E. Lee had a distinct plan to win the third day of the battle and that it could have been won. He reminds us that each new generation revisits ad infinitum the question of what if.

Carhart attempts to refute the long-held belief that Lee (one of the greatest soldiers of all time, in his view) made a wrong decision in launching Pickett's Charge to crack the center of George G. Meade's Federal lines on Cemetery Ridge. Carhart suggests that using only twenty-percent of his total available forces for a headlong rush across open fields and under withering enemy fire (notwithstanding the preliminary depressant bombardment) was only part of a distinct plan for that final afternoon of battle. The idea that two days of fighting had tested the Yankee flanks and that one final push against the center would fold Lee's opponent has long been a staple of the Gettysburg story. Carhart believes that Lee intended Pickett's Charge to be simply part of a coordinated

attack — the main thrust but with two supporting maneuvers, one of which was to be the now-blurred, virtually forgotten role that J.E. B. Stuart's cavalry was to play in a Napoleonic coup de grace Lee had studied the French Great Captain earlier in his career and patterned the final hours of Gettysburg to fit the masterful strokes of Jena and Austerlitz in Carhart's view. Of course, we have long known that Pickett's supporting cast would come from flank commands, and even those Confederates over at Culp's Hill would do their part to prevent reinforcements from reaching Winfield Scott Hancock's embattled center of Meade's position. But, the Stuart story is another matter, and here, Carhart brings back into focus that lost element of the Gettysburg story.

Of course, in addition to Lee and Stuart, Carhart injects another character calculated to sell well with the public. Carhart's contention is that Stuart's directed move against the Federal rear area, by circling from the York road east and south via little known country roads, was stopped cold by blue clad cavalry principally under George Armstrong Custer. With Custer joining Lee and Stuart for the plot, the only thing missing from a potential best seller then would be sex. Yet, there is enough here otherwise to make for good reading and stimulating discussion. Notwithstanding Carhart's aim to absolve Lee of culpability for Pickett's disaster by suggesting that Stuart once more failed his leader and then covered up that failure, the author also builds a persuasive case for a lackluster Federal cavalry commander David Gregg standing aside as the audacious Custer conducted a battle-winning, saber-swinging charge that stopped Stuart cold and therefore thwarted Lee's plan for a coordinated assault on Cemetery Ridge. Here, the book fails in the same manner as Lee's plan due to execution not concept. Instead of in-depth, critical re-analysis of all possible sources, Carhart wanders through repetitive writing, pans to his heroes and various byways of history.

Even then, Carhart and Professor James McPherson, who delivers a cameo foreword, are dead wrong that past historians have neglected this part of the Gettysburg story. If the meaning and pivotal nature of the cavalry action on what the National Park Service styles East Cavalry Field have taken a back seat to Pickett's suicidal story, that is as much the fault of the physical location of the historical site and tourism as anything else. Certainly Professor Edward Coddington explored Stuart's role and the resulting fight with Gregg and Custer in **The Gettysburg Campaign; A Study in Command** (1968), pages 520- 523 as did retired lieutenant general Edward J. Stackpole twelve years before that in **They Met at Gettysburg**, pages 278-283, for example. What Carhart contributes then is the notion that Lee had a defined plan, entrusted its delivery

to subordinates and was thwarted in its execution by those subordinates. In such assertion, there has to be much faith, presumption and assertion via inherent logic of how soldiers conduct battles rather than hard written evidence. Carhart seems comfortable using such tactics, perhaps more so than most academics or even laymen.

Carhart has a theme that warrants more extensive coverage and detail than allowed by this book. Frankly, he wastes valuable space discussing ephemera like the Mexican war, the causes of the Civil War, classical battles of history, the combat arms interoperability of the Napoleonic era as well as operations in the eastern theater leading to Gettysburg. This is a ten-chapter story (not the fifteen of this book), at best. While perhaps never reaching seminal conclusions about Lee, any plan that might have been afoot on the night of July 2/3, 1863 or how events subsequently transpired for the defeat in Pennsylvania, such a study could flatter Civil War historiography with an in-depth treatment of leadership, planning and execution during those last pivotal hours of the meeting. Carhart's study is by no means an unimportant new work on Gettysburg, to be sure. It must remain a trade not a scholarly piece since it plays to glamorous characters — Lee, Stuart and Custer to underscore points at the expense of more balanced and probing analysis. Its' arteries are clogged with what a demanding editor could have condensed into one chapter on what all had happened before Gettysburg in the history of warfare. Still, Carhart can be praised for reviving a long neglected element to a familiar topic. This corner of a forgotten field now stands about where Faulkner would have it — the story still in the balance with still time for it to be re-done in greater detail to satisfy the next generation of Americans seeking resolution of the ghosts of the past. For Carhart, that undulating ground east of the town of Gettysburg with the charging horsemen of Stuart, Gregg and Custer — not Pickett's infantry miles away to the west — holds the key to such resolution and another look at the famous battle.

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