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Gettysburg and Midway: Historical Parallelsin Operational Command

Robert C. Rubel

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Captain Robert C. Rubel, U.S. Navy

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY is to show the profound effect a commander in chief's approach to operational command can have on the course of events in war. It does so by analyzing the performance of two operational-level commanders in chief, General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, and Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy Combined Fleet, during the defining campaign of their respective careers. These specific battles are selected to demonstrate that the requirements of operational-level command transcend time, technology, and environment. Additionally, it is in the study of the losing commanders that the most compelling lessons can be drawn. The picture that emerges is an endorsement of Carl von Clausewitz's notion that there are no hard and fast rules that govern the conduct of war; it is the presence of the commander that decisively influences the course of events—for better or worse.[1]

This focus on the commander in chief recognizes that the process of command at the operational level of war is a distinct discipline. An operational commander in chief must orchestrate the actions of a large and complex organization under the most difficult of circumstances and must creatively out-think his counterpart on the other side. His span of control is so great that there is no possibility of directly responding to everything that happens. He therefore must impose his will on people with whom he has little or no direct contact, and he must get them to act as he would wish even though he cannot know all the situations they will face or even be entirely familiar with their characters.

Captain Rubel is a member of the Joint Military Operations Department of the Naval War College. A naval aviator, he has served in light attack and strike fighter squadrons, commanding VFA–131. He holds master's degrees from Salve Regina University and the Naval War College, and he is a graduate of the Spanish Naval War College. He is the author of a review essay, "A Dazzling Vision of Antiseptic Warfare," in the Winter 1994 issue of this journal.

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The term "operational art" denotes the collection of requirements and skills necessary for effective command at the operational level. The word "art" is used advisedly; it indicates that operational-level command is a process sensitive to the abilities of the practitioner. If it were a science, it would depend on knowledge of certain absolute truths and their application to situations that arise. A considerable amount of the current literature in the field of military theory concerns itself with principles and concepts, technology and doctrine—leading one perhaps to suppose that these things exclusively govern the conduct of war. As usual, von Clausewitz has the best commentary on the matter: "It is only analytically that these attempts at theory can be called advances in the realm of truth; synthetically, in the rules and regulations they offer, they are absolutely useless."[2] In other words, one can study war by using theory, principles, and doctrine to disassemble it into understandable chunks, but when the responsibility of command descends and one has to put it all together, there is nothing but judgment and personal approach to help one practice the art. How Lee and Yamamoto practiced the art exerted decisive influence on the campaigns we shall examine.

Historical Parallels and the Study of War

In the world of wargaming, there are two terms commonly used to characterize the computer models that calculate outcomes. "Deterministic" models are like machinery; they crank out identical products every time, given identical inputs. "Stochastic" models, on the other hand, use probabalistic calculations and thus may not yield identical results even if the inputs are the same. War, to invoke von Clausewitz once again, is the playground of chance, and it requires the practitioner to calculate probabilities.[3] Real war is therefore stochastic. This characteristic has bedeviled theorists who have sought to identify principles and laws of strategy. Blind application of a particular principle or doctrine cannot be relied upon in any particular instance to produce victory; the real world of human interactions is too complex and messy to be encompassed by a few simple rules.

The complex nature of war should not, however, deter us from trying to understand its elements and to learn from the failures and successes of those who have conducted it in the past. In studying the chronicle of warfare, its stochastic nature becomes evident; concentrating force, for instance, does not always lead to victory any more than dividing one's force in the face of a superior enemy invariably invites disaster. Therefore, when one does find parallels events in the historical record, they should be scrutinized for evidence that, in certain circumstances, certain approaches to the problem of combat command are likely to bring about similar results at least more than once. Put another way, if actual

war is likened to a stochastic computer model, whenever similar results are observed, it is worthwhile to go back and check the inputs.

The battles of Gettysburg and Midway are such parallels, and it turns out that for all their separation in time and setting, among their similarities are some that seem to be the product of more than pure chance. This is all the more striking because one is an American Civil War land battle, fought with some of the same kinds of equipment and tactics Napoleon used, and the other a sea battle between aircraft carrier forces; moreover, the cultural differences between the losing commanders, Robert E. Lee and Isoroku Yamamoto, appear to be vast. While these are not battles that leap to mind as subjects for comparison, the "computer" of war does seem to have calculated some surprising parallels between them, due to some interestingly similar inputs.

The Parallels

The battles of Gettysburg and Midway marked turning points in their respective wars. In both cases the United States secured a tactical victory that gave it the strategic breathing space needed to build, with its massive economic power, an armed force that would eventually overwhelm its adversary. In both cases, U.S. forces defeated an enemy that had a reputation for tactical invincibility, thereby greatly promoting the morale of the American people as well as that of their military commanders and fighting forces. Before these battles, the enemy had enjoyed the initiative and a string of tactical victories that had kept the U.S. off balance and the issue of the war in doubt. After the battles, neither the Confederates nor the Japanese were ever again in such a favorable in position to win the war through battlefield victory.

In both battles, the U.S. forces fought on the operational defensive. In neither case did the battle fit into any overall American strategy except as something required to meet a threat to a base of operations. However, Major General George Meade's Army of the Potomac fought on the tactical defensive, whereas Admiral Chester Nimitz's Pacific Fleet forces (under the command of Rear Admirals Frank Jack Fletcher and Raymond Spruance) took the tactical offensive. These differences reflect the basic requirements of each kind of warfare (sea and land) and the nature of the weapons the respective forces used. However, in both campaigns, owing to the enemy's failure to provide for adequate scouting, the U.S. was able to pick the time and place of the battle to its advantage and thus secure the inherent strengths of defensive warfare.

Both of the battles were lost in part due to the lack of timely and aggressive decision making by a key subordinate to the commander in chief. In the case of Gettysburg, Lieutenant General Richard Ewell, commanding the Confederate

II Corps, failed to occupy Culp's Hill when it was his for the taking; at Midway, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, commanding the Japanese First Carrier Striking Force, failed to make a timely decision to attack the American task force when he became aware of its presence. On both occasions inaction permitted the United States forces to achieve a position of tactical superiority that neither Lee nor Yamamoto could subsequently recoup. In contrast, outstanding decisions by U.S. subordinates seized the advantage at critical moments. The decision by Brigadier General John Buford to risk a defense with dismounted cavalry against an infantry force of unknown size can be compared to the decision by Spruance to order an attack on the Japanese carriers even though his aerial strike group was not completely launched or organized. This position of tactical advantage stole the initiative from the attacker, who as a result suffered heavy losses to his outstanding first-line forces. Neither the Confederates nor the Japanese were able to recover fully from these losses.

The Inputs

The two battles, then, bear a distinct resemblance. Even the circumstances under which the battles were joined and the performance of subordinate officers were impressively alike. Accepting that chance can always produce like results from unlike causes, it still seems worthwhile to search among the threads of similarity in these battles' "inputs" in search of useful generalizations about the art of war.

Similar Strategic Dilemmas. Although both the South and the Japanese had, through the use of brilliant tactics against an ill prepared opponent, seized the operational and even the strategic initiative, their long-term prospects appeared questionable. For the industry-poor South, gasping under the squeeze of the North's economic blockade, a protracted war of attrition was not feasible. Japan likewise did not possess an industrial base sufficient to engage in such a war with the United States. Both Lee and Yamamoto saw time running against their countries. Neither opponent's initial gambits had brought the United States to the bargaining table, and for each the question of what to do next was the subject of debate at the highest levels.

In both cases, the dilemma presented to the national authorities was how to use their best maneuver forces to secure permanent strategic advantage. The South in early 1863 had to contemplate the threat to its communication with Texas and to the access, through Mexico, to the resources of the outside world that such communication represented. New Orleans had been lost the previous spring, and contact with the trans-Mississippi theater hinged on maintaining Vicksburg. However, by June Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant's troops were threatening Vicksburg, and Union forces in Tennessee menaced Atlanta and

such industrial and resource heartland as the Confederacy possessed. Its best maneuver force was the Army of Northern Virginia, under Lee. Should this force, or parts of it, be sent west to secure the Southern position there? Or should it be concentrated in the East to seek decisive battle against the battered but intact Army of the Potomac, a battle that might lead directly to peace negotiations?[4]

The situation facing Japanese leadership was similar. To the south lay the resource-rich East Indies, which represented staying power for the Empire; however, the buildup of Allied forces in Australia posed a serious threat to Japan's access there. To the east lay the undefeated U.S. Pacific Fleet. Should the victorious Combined Fleet be used to secure Japan's position in the south, or to defeat the Pacific Fleet in a decisive battle that could lead to a negotiated settlement with the United States?[5]

Strategy has been defined as both an art and a science, but when the bullets fly, strategy boils down to what people think about war and the influence they each exert in the decisions made about where, when, why, and how to fight. In the case of the Confederacy and Japan, the resolution of their respective strategic dilemmas was influenced decisively by what Lee and Yamamoto thought about fighting.[6]

The Insistence of an Operational Commander. Both Robert E. Lee and Isoroku Yamamoto were enterprising commanders who believed in the utility of activity. Both men, as junior officers, had served with distinction in earlier wars. They each had inherited a defensive strategic doctrine as they assumed their respective commands but soon discarded it as unsuitable to the situations that they faced.[7] Lee realized that digging in and conducting a positional defense of Richmond would invite eventual pulverization of his army by superior Union forces. He felt he had to wrest the initiative from Major General Joseph Hooker, then commanding the Army of the Potomac.[8] Yamamoto likewise rejected the defensive doctrine of the Imperial Japanese Navy, which contemplated ambushing the U.S. fleet as it sailed into the Western Pacific to take back the Philippines. Given the need for naval support for operations in the south to secure resources, he felt he could not sit and wait for the U.S. Pacific Fleet to arrive at its own convenience; he had to deal with it on his terms.[9]

Both commanders were consummate operational planners and decision makers, adept at outfoxing and outmaneuvering their enemies. They consequently developed a serene confidence in the fighting prowess of their forces and in their own command abilities that made them risk-oriented rather than risk-averse. Two months before Gettysburg, Lee had divided his smaller force in front of a numerically superior enemy at Chancellorsville in order to maintain the tactical initiative. Yamamoto, in dispatching his fleet to surprise the Pacific

Fleet at Pearl Harbor, had hazarded his aircraft carriers in an attack unsupported by land-based air in the face of significant American land defenses. Both gambits met with great success and reinforced the commanders' belief in the utility of operational risk-taking.[10]

As a result of their early successes, both Lee and Yamamoto had achieved considerable prestige and influence in the highest circles of government, not to mention among the general public. Each man brought this prestige and influence as a winner on the battlefield decisively to bear in getting his views accepted by national authorities.[11] Thus in each case, matters of national strategic policy were in effect decided by an operational-level commander whose outlook was formed by a faith in decisive battle and a conviction of the necessity to accept risk to precipitate such a battle.

Lack of Strategic Priority. Interestingly enough, the strategic outlooks of both Lee and Yamamoto were heavily influenced by concern for the security of their countries' capitals. Lee saw his invasion of Pennsylvania as a means of drawing the Army of the Potomac away from northern Virginia and reducing the threat to Richmond without resorting to a static defense of the city.[12] Yamamoto's fixation on Midway was cemented by the April 1942 Doolittle raid on Tokyo and his desire prevent a recurrence by eradicating the Pacific Fleet.[13]

While concern for the security of their capitals gave useful leverage in gaining acceptance for their projects, both Lee and Yamamoto clearly thought that the best hope for a successful end to the war lay in annihilating the enemy in the campaigns upon which they were about to embark. A sufficiently complete destruction of remaining U.S. forces would lay open the American homeland to operations that would demoralize the populace and, from the perspective of Lee and Yamamoto, strengthen the hand of those in the United States who might counsel peace.[14]

There were also other reasons for undertaking the Gettysburg and Midway campaigns. Lee was short of forage for his horses and mules as well as of many other items of supply that might be gained from the rich countryside of Pennsylvania and points north. He made enough of this aspect of the proposed operation to convince some that it was the primary reason for embarking on the campaign.[15] Yamamoto too had other uses for a successful campaign. He felt that Japanese operations in the south against Australia and New Guinea would otherwise constantly be threatened by the American fleet on his eastern flank.[16] In a real sense, the Midway campaign constituted a monumental flank-securing operation.

Whatever their reasons for insisting on those particular campaigns, at the most fundamental level neither Lee nor Yamamoto could abide inaction, and both required a suitable outlet for their martial spirits. The majestic scope of each campaign, the lure of glory, and the promise of strategic decision pulled them inexorably toward the showdown. But the very multiplicity of prior justifications

for the campaigns proved disastrous in the end, because in each case the lack of clear relative priority among the goals and objectives of the campaign, especially that of waging decisive battle, led to failure to concentrate forces at the critical place and fatal indecision at the critical moment.

Failures in Scouting. Much has been made of the ignorance of both Lee and Yamamoto as to the whereabouts of the U.S. force that opposed them. In Lee's case, Major General J.E.B. Stuart and his cavalry failed to maintain contact with either the main Union forces or his own, causing Lee to march blindly into a collision with the Army of the Potomac on ground unfavorable to the Confederates.[17] Likewise, the Japanese Combined Fleet sailed unawares into an American naval ambush, finding out too late that three Pacific Fleet carriers awaited them at Midway.[18]

The reasons behind each commander's failure to ensure adequate scouting are open to speculation. Certainly both Lee and Yamamoto were sufficiently skilled field commanders to understand the necessity for scouting, and both had made provisions for it. In both cases, however, negligence on the part of a principal subordinate led to a breakdown. General Stuart failed to keep Lee informed on Federal movements, and Admiral Nagumo sealed his own fate by failing to mount a sufficiently aggressive tactical reconnaissance.[19]

In both battles, however easy it may be to pin the blame on subordinate commanders, the commander in chief retains some responsibility for these failures. In the first place, neither Lee nor Yamamoto seemed to appreciate fully the importance of detailed knowledge of enemy movements in a campaign designed to precipitate a battle that they hoped would decide the war. They both assumed the U.S. force would react predictably to their own movements, and the lack of information seemed only to confirm their own expectations.[20] Moreover, lack of intelligence did not deter them from pressing on with their respective plans, even though the level of risk in an already chancy operation had become thereby even higher.

The reason for this lapse in judgment may be found in the soaring confidence each commander had in his force. Both the Army of Northern Virginia and the Japanese Combined Fleet could, with justification, claim to be the finest fighting force of its kind in the world at the time. Lee and Yamamoto both felt that their commands would inevitably prevail in any situation in which the enemy could be brought to battle.[21] In this frame of mind, complacency about scouting could easily develop. Both men expected their movements to stimulate an enemy countermove that would bring about the expected engagement. The enemy was going to come to them, they would defeat the enemy when he arrived, and that was that.

The Decisive Place and Time. If there is a principle that is universally accepted by military theorists and writers, it is that a commander should attempt to concentrate his own forces when and where it matters most. Concentration may be absolute (that is, having all one's force available) or relative (being superior to the enemy at the point of contact), but either way, successful results in a battle cannot be expected, especially on the tactical offensive, if superior combat power cannot be brought to bear. At Gettysburg and Midway, neither Lee nor Yamamoto, two acknowledged masters of the operational art, adhered to this principle. Both of their forces had sufficient combat power in the aggregate to achieve a battlefield victory if favorable conditions for engagement could be obtained. Lee's army, while numerically inferior to the Army of the Potomac, was a combat-proven force whose effective power had consistently been out of proportion to its numbers. Yamamoto, on the other hand, had a fleet that was superior to the American task forces both in numbers and in certain aspects of fighting capability, such as aircraft range, torpedo tactics, and night gunnery.

Lee's inability to concentrate was partially a function of his order of march. He sent his army across the Potomac piecemeal, partly in order to maintain a credible rear guard in case Hooker decided at that moment to advance on Richmond.[22] Lack of parallel avenues of advance further exacerbated Lee's maneuver problems, and by the eve of the battle the Army of Northern Virginia found itself spread out over many miles along the narrow defiles of the Cumberland Valley. The final division of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's corps was to be unable to reach the scene of the battle until the evening of the second day of the battle, too late to have a decisive effect. Yamamoto likewise strung out his forces. The most egregious dispersal was of his aircraft carriers; he assigned two of his eight carriers to a deception operation in the Aleutians, kept one more with his so-called "Main Body," and placed another with his invasion force. Almost half of his total carrier strength was thereby prevented from participating in the main engagement.

Each commander failed, in designing his operational campaign, to achieve consistency between the principal goal of the operation and the force dispositions employed. In light of the strategic situation in which each commander found himself—a high-stakes gamble to stave off ultimate strategic defeat—taking unnecessary operational risks by failing to provide for rapid concentration should the desired major battle present itself seems almost incomprehensible, especially considering the demonstrated talent of the two commanders. The answer again seems to revolve around complacency borne of successive victories. Both men had achieved success by breaking, rather than adhering to, conventional military wisdom, and each seems to have lost some respect for both his enemy and the dangers of war in general.[23]

Indecision by Key Subordinates. General Ewell's failure to occupy Culp's Hill on the first day of the battle of Gettysburg is commonly cited as one of the major contributing factors in the Confederates' defeat. Worried about a possible Union flanking attack and the fatigue of his men, he chose to take up temporary defensive positions around Gettysburg rather than press the attack on into the evening. Had he acted aggressively to take the high ground while it was still weakly held, the ill fated attacks on the following days might have been avoided.[24]

Likewise, Admiral Nagumo's failure to launch promptly a strike against the U.S. forces he had just found doomed his four carriers to a bombing attack with their decks crowded with fully fueled and armed aircraft.[25] He opted to recover his fighters and prepare an escorted attack on Spruance's force because he had just witnessed the carnage that had befallen the initial unescorted American raids on his force. The fatal dive-bombing attack occurred just as he was completing these preparations. Had the American attack been any less successful than it was, Nagumo might indeed have annihilated the U.S. force.

The intriguing question is why these officers failed to demonstrate initiative when the need arose. The issue is all the more puzzling given the aggressive nature of their respective commanders in chief. For Ewell, part of the problem was that he was new to command. Assuming command of Stonewall Jackson's corps after that brilliant tactician's death on the eve of the Gettysburg campaign, Ewell was presented challenges with which few officers might have been capable of coping. He had little opportunity to develop confidence in either his own judgment or the capabilities of his lieutenants. These leadership challenges were exacerbated by Lee's own style of command. Ewell had functioned well as a division commander under Jackson; Jackson's directives had been very detailed, left little room for interpretation, and had given Ewell small opportunity to develop the analytical thinking that underpins initiative. Lee's discretionary orders proved debilitating for a commander like Ewell, because Lee had not impressed on him a clear vision of the campaign's objective or accompanied his orders with a clear statement of intent.[26]

Nagumo, on the other hand, was an experienced carrier task force commander who had commanded the Pearl Harbor attack and several operations in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. However, he was also a methodical and cautious flag officer, a battleship specialist who now found himself in command of an aircraft carrier–centered fleet. He had been criticized for failing to follow up on the initial success at Pearl Harbor; in fact, Yamamoto had been pressed to relieve him but had refused to do so for fear he would commit suicide.[27]

Each of these officers has had his supporters and detractors among historians and analysts. Detractors accuse them of indecision, and supporters claim they were exercising justified caution. However that may be, their failure to risk

aggressive tactical action allowed in each case the U.S. force to gain a measure of initiative that ultimately decided the battle. In part, responsibility for this failure to exercise initiative must rest with the commander in chief. Failure to impart a clear vision of the campaign's purpose and the place of decisive battle within it made it possible for each of these officers to opt legitimately and rationally for a too-cautious tactical course of action at the critical moment.

Old and New Forms of Warfare. Despite prior battlefield successes that had taken advantage of improved weapons at their disposal, in the battles of Gettysburg and Midway both commanders reverted to tactics appropriate to weapons of the previous generation. Lee had enjoyed great success employing a tactical defensive that was enhanced by the new rifled muskets. Effective at over twice the range of smooth-bores, these new weapons made traditional infantry charges excessively costly. Assuming the tactical defense at Fredericksburg, Confederate forces had mowed down attacking Federals. While Lee's understanding of the new-found strength of the defense may not have been complete, the lesson was abundantly clear to officers such as General Longstreet, who sought to engage the Army of the Potomac using the strengths of the tactical defensive.[28] Lee must have had some appreciation of this when he decided to divide his forces at Chancellorsville in the face of a superior enemy. For his part, Yamamoto was considered the oracle of carrier warfare in the Imperial Japanese Navy. His design for the Pearl Harbor attack had reflected his understanding of the potential of this new form of naval warfare. The results of Pearl Harbor had provided ample reinforcement of the doctrine.

Yet embarking on the most portentous operations of their careers, both commanders reverted to forms of warfare made obsolete by their new weapons and tactics, and which they themselves had seen fail when used by the enemy. At Gettysburg, Lee ordered Pickett's charge across open ground against prepared Federal positions when he must have understood its hazards. Yamamoto made his battleships the centerpiece of his tactical plan even though it was by then evident that the aircraft carrier was the ship that counted.[29] It is difficult to account for these lapses, and available evidence for their rationale is scanty. It is possible that when the strategic stakes became sufficiently high, the commanders' confidence in the new forms of fighting was insufficient to bolster their nerve, causing them to adopt the methods they had seen succeed in their formative years. As a captain during the war with Mexico, Lee had participated in the storming of Chapultepec. There, even though he learned about the value of strong fortifications, he saw the tactical offensive carry the day.[30] Yamamoto had served with Admiral Heihachiro Togo at the battle of Tsushima and had seen the big guns of the Japanese battleships annihilate the Russian squadron.[31]

In any event, in their greatest trials both commanders changed their modes of operation and found themselves applying inappropriate tactics. One of the responsibilities of an operational commander is to understand the nature of battle and to adapt to new forms that technology demands. In this fundamental aspect of the operational art, both men failed.

Command at a Distance. Finally, these two commanders failed one of the most crucial tests of operational command: the ability to influence the course of events that are outside the immediate span of personal control. A tactical commander's job is to extract maximum fighting performance from his engaged forces. In this role he is in explicit control of the situation and can react to sudden developments with immediate and specific orders. The operational commander, by contrast, is removed by one order of cause and effect from direct control of events. He must achieve orchestration of the varied elements of his command through influence. Not being privy to every local tactical detail, he must rely on the judgement of his subordinate commanders to accept or avoid risk in consonance with his overall intent for the operation.

Both Lee and Yamamoto had a fatally flawed command and control arrangement. For a variety of reasons, neither enjoyed a productive relationship with key subordinates. They failed to exercise effective influence over the situation because they did not firmly establish in their subordinates' minds the importance of a major engagement in the overall scheme of campaign.[32] Additionally, neither commander promptly provided information, guidance, or even moral support once it became evident that the sought-for major battle with U.S. forces was imminent.[33] In striking contrast is Admiral Chester Nimitz's council of war with his tactical commanders, Spruance and Fletcher, and his message concerning calculated risk.[34] Nimitz's influence allowed Spruance, a normally circumspect and cautious commander, to go against type and to get in the first blow by ordering his incompletely launched and half-organized strike forces to attack Nagumo.

Lessons

It is clear that similarities in the observed results of the two battles are attended by some striking similarities in the decisions and command styles of Lee and Yamamoto. Differences in environment and weapons—one battle being a twentieth-century naval engagement involving aircraft and submarines almost exclusively, the other a Napoleonic land battle of foot soldiers and smooth-bore artillery—seem less relevant than the parallels in the personalities and approaches of the commanders, at least the losing ones. It is in the personal approaches to operational command on the part of Lee and Yamamoto that the most enduring

lessons can be found, for in the planning and decision making of these two commanders some of the similarities in the results of the two great battles can be understood.

The first lesson is that strategy should be left to strategists, which validates Clemenceau's dictum that war is too important to be left to generals. Lee and Yamamoto ventured into the realm of strategic decision making with a rather narrow perspective that was based on their faith in the strategic utility of battlefield victory. To the misfortune of the Confederacy and Japan, they served no wartime strategists like Lincoln or Roosevelt, who possessed the perspective and authority to prevent the displacement of coherent grand strategy by operational-level opportunism.

The second lesson is that the operational commander in chief must build internal consistency into his plans. Each of the campaigns studied here was a risky strategic venture, normally the recourse of the desperate. Given the high stakes, each commander should have attempted to minimize the operational risks. Lee would have been well advised to provide for quicker concentration, or at least to form a contingency plan for managing an unexpected meeting engagement. Yamamoto should have kept his force concentrated so that he could have steamrolled the Americans whether they struck by surprise or not. However, reducing operational-level risks sometimes means accepting greater tactical ones. Both Ewell and Nagumo could have risked an aggressive attack and thereby saved the day. They did not because their orders did not impart to them the vision that would have allowed them responsibly to accept greater risk.

Consistency not only means complementary risk management, it also means knowing what one wants. An organization cannot have more than one top priority, or its members will find themselves working at cross purposes. At Gettysburg and Midway the fundamental implied objective in the plans of both commanders was to generate a decisive battle that would destroy the enemy's remaining main maneuver forces in the theater. That was the object of the strategic risk, and it should have ordered all efforts; but neither commander established that priority, either in the disposition of his forces or in his guidance to his subordinates. Nor is it even clear that either man had expressly prioritized the objectives in his own mind. Beforehand, in marshalling their arguments to gain approval for their respective projects, both Lee and Yamamoto had articulated a variety of objectives and benefits, and both may have ended up confusing themselves as to what exactly they were about.

Thirdly, the operational commander must have faith in his methods. Mastery of the art of war involves understanding the characteristics of the weapons at hand and their influence on both tactical and operational-level plans. Technology is always creating new and improved weapons, tactics undergo change, and senior commanders are often faced with having to apply appreciably different

methods than those they learned as junior officers. Lee and Yamamoto appeared to lose their poise as the burden of national salvation descended on their shoulders, and they abandoned their newly acquired warfare expertise in favor of methods they had seen work years before.

The fourth lesson is that the operational art is a delicate balance of delegation and influence. The commander simply cannot control everything that is going on in a battle or campaign; he must allow subordinates room to exercise initiative. However, he retains absolute responsibility for everything that happens and must take steps to ensure that all parts of the force work with unity of purpose. He achieves this by establishing a close and forthright relationship with his key subordinates and imbedding his vision in their minds before action occurs. Once the operation is underway, he must follow up his training of subordinates by providing them information, guidance, and moral support to help ensure they react to the changing fortunes of battle in consonance with his intent.

Finally, the biggest lesson that can be drawn may be that though forms of war change, people do not. Theorists search in vain for the perfect strategy or for immutable principles of war. Clausewitz admonishes us that the human genius for war will always operate outside the rules. Conversely, as these cases show, even geniuses fall prey to such human frailties as pride, complacency, and irresolution. While these faults may be understandable reactions to the pressure cooker of war, when they reside in the operational commander in chief even the finest weapons and the bravest soldiers, sailors, and airmen cannot save the cause.

Notes

1. This article assumes a general familiarity with the battles and personalities that are its subjects. The author recommends the following books for the best overall descriptions: Gettysburg: *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, by Edwin B. Coddington (New York: Macmillan, 1968). For Midway: *The Barrier and the Javelin*, by H.P. Willmott (Annapolis Md: Naval Institute Press, 1983).

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and eds. (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 136.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 101–2.

4. Coddington, pp. 4–5,9; Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1937), v. III, pp. 18–9; and Archer Jones, *Confederate Strategy from Shiloh to Vicksburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1991), chap. XI.

5. Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway, the Battle that Doomed Japan: The Japanese Navy's Story* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1955), pp. 34–5; and John Deane Potter, *Yamamoto: The Man Who Menaced America* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), pp. 140–54.

6. Coddington, pp. 5–7; and Fuchida, p. 49.

7. Fuchida, p. 12; Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), letter 463, p. 504.

8. Coddington, pp. 5,7–8; J.J. Bowen, *The Strategy of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Neale, 1914), p. 140; and Dowdey and Manarin, letter 497, pp. 532–3.

9. Potter, p. 36; and Fuchida, p. 50. For a further analysis of the Japanese prewar defensive doctrine and Yamamoto's role in changing it, see "A Commander's Dilemma: Admiral Yamamoto and the 'Gradual Attrition' Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1993, by Captain Yoji Koda of the Japanese Maritime

Self-Defense Force. The reader will observe in this article both an excellent description of the defensive doctrine Yamamoto discarded and evidence of the high esteem this leader still elicits from the Japanese, much as General Lee continues to be revered by many Americans. Captain Koda attempts to exculpate Yamamoto by saying that revising fleet doctrine was too big a job for one admiral. This author feels that the Pearl Harbor operation and subsequent ones leading to Midway demonstrated that the Imperial Japanese Navy was indeed capable of adapting to the new form of sea warfare.

10. Coddington, p. 8; Freeman, pp. 23–4; Bowen, p. 136; and Potter, p. 139.

11. Peter J. Parrish, *The American Civil War* (New York: Holms and Meier, 1975), p. 280; and Potter, p. 139.

12. Dowdey, p. 504.

13. Fuchida, pp. 64–5.

14. Potter, pp. 43–4, 179, 185; and Fuchida, pp. 59, 76.

15. Freeman, p. 19.

16. Fuchida, pp. 35–7.

17. Dowdey, p. 580. Lee admits earlier in this letter (p. 576) that he had not expected to encounter Union forces at this location or time.

18. H. P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1983), pp. 367–9.

19. Freeman, p. 147. Other writers, including Coddington, have deflected the blame onto others, including Robertson, one of Stuart's brigade commanders; see Coddington, pp. 182–5. Defects in scouting plagued the Japanese campaign plan at several levels, but Nagumo's scouting plan was the proximate cause for his misfortunes. See Fuchida, pp. 145–50.

20. Freeman, p. 147; and Willmott, pp. 350–1.

21. Coddington, p. 25; and Potter, pp. 139, 179.

22. Coddington, pp. 68–9.

23. The fighting spirit and mettle of the Army of Northern Virginia on the eve of the invasion of Pennsylvania was the subject of comment by several observers. Lee, as much in the emotional grip of his soldiers as they were in his, seems to have been caught up in the atmosphere of confidence. His letter of 21 May 1863 to General John B. Hood expresses this confidence despite his concerns over finding replacements for the deceased Stonewall Jackson and other leaders. See Dowdey and Manarin, letter 447, p. 490. The "victory disease" of the Japanese is well documented. More specifically, Yamamoto, for all of his respect for the overall power of the United States, also seems to have developed a kind of disdain for the fighting ability of the U.S. Navy. At the very least, he appeared to make no effort to discourage overconfidence on the part of his staff and subordinates. Fuchida repeatedly brings out this aspect of the Imperial Japanese Navy's organizational climate; see pp. 134, 170, 207, 246.

24. Some evidence for this analysis is provided by General Meade's 3:00 P.M. letter of 2 July to General Henry Halleck, general in chief of the Army, in which he states an intent to fall back to Westminster if he sees the Confederates trying to get to his rear. If Ewell had taken Culp's Hill, the Confederates would have been in a position to get to the rear of Federal positions on Cemetery Ridge and Meade might very well have elected to withdraw. Meade ends his letter by assuring Halleck that he would act with caution, which, among Union generals, generally meant withdrawing to avoid encirclement. His letter of 8:00 P.M. of the same day also betrays a degree of skittishness. U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1889), v. 27, part I, p. 72.

25. Fuchida, pp. 169–73.

26. General Ewell's performance on the first day of the battle is the subject of controversy. His detractors, including Generals Trimble and Gordon, accused him of culpable indecision. Even his supporters admit that had he been a leader of Jackson's caliber, he might have been able to organize an attack on Culp's Hill. See Coddington, pp. 318–9. Freeman's account of the events of that evening focuses on Ewell's inability to rise to the demands of the situation; see Freeman, pp. 76–8.

27. Potter, p. 123.

28. Coddington, pp. 360–1.

29. Yamamoto sent Nagumo, with his four carriers, out ahead of the "Main Body," which included seven battleships. Nagumo's carriers were being used to attack Midway and create the conditions under which the Main Body could decisively engage the remnants of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. In this stage of the battle, the carriers were being used as skirmishers or cavalry, a role subordinate to the battleship and reflecting obsolete pre-war doctrine.

30. Freeman, v. 1, pp. 295–6.

31. Potter, p. 12.

32. Lee anticipated a battle with Union forces, but it did not seem to be the centerpiece of his strategy. Thus his subordinates demonstrated insufficient sense of urgency at critical times to do those things that would ensure engagement under the best possible circumstances. Lee's concept for the Gettysburg campaign had a

definite opportunistic flavor that made it difficult for subordinates to grasp the significance of emerging situations. See Coddington, pp. 8–9. Yamamoto was clear about his desire to destroy the American fleet, but he and his staff were so sure that the Americans would act predictably that he placed Nagumo in a position in which that subordinate would have to make a split-second decision as to priority and risk that rightly belonged to the commander in chief himself. See Fuchida, pp. 126–7.

33. Lee's style of discretionary or conditional order writing is well documented; see Coddington, p. 192. Lee's instruction to Ewell to take Cemetery Hill "if practicable" was just another instance, and one that Ewell, already frustrated by such orders, apparently felt free to interpret as a suggestion, especially since it appeared to involve considerable risk. Additionally, Lee kept his grand designs for the campaign to himself, because he had seen his privately expressed views find their way into the newspapers. See Gen. James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox* (New York: Mallard Press, 1991), pp. 336–7. Yamamoto insisted on exercising command from the battleship *Yamato*, where, far to the rear of Nagumo's carrier forces, he steadfastly refused to break radio silence. See Fuchida, pp. 123–4; and Willmott, pp. 362, 368–9.

34. E.B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 87.

Ψ

I don't know anything of the manoeuvres. The boys kept coming to me, to let them charge; and when I saw a good opportunity, I told them they might go. They were off like a shot, and that's all I know about it.

Colonel (later General) Alexander W. Doniphan,
Missouri Militia, on the battle of the
Sacramento River, 28 February 1846.

I do not think a sailor is well qualified for a command of this character. . . . They have very rarely the time or opportunity to study military history and the art of war in general.

Winston Churchill, July 1943,
draft of an (unsent) letter to Franklin
D. Roosevelt, on the proposed
appointment of Admiral A. B.
Cunningham, RN, to the South East
Asia Command.