

APPROVED FOR RELEASE 1994
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM

18 SEPT 95

TITLE: Communication To The Editors

AUTHOR:

VOLUME: 2 ISSUE: Fall YEAR: 1958

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

All statements of fact, opinion or analysis expressed in Studies in Intelligence are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US Government entity, past or present. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

Communication to the Editors

COMMUNICATION TO THE EDITORS

Dear Sirs:

The rather iffy article on the origin and consequences of Antietam that appeared in the Winter 1958 issue of *Studies* merits some comment. In their haste to turn the Confederate tide at Sharpsburg, its authors have fallen into significant errors of fact and interpretation. Several basic facts were not quite as they presented them; certainly, the consequences of Antietam were at once both minimized and overstated.

It is fair to say that the discovery of Special Orders 191 brought on the battle at Antietam Creek if this means it got McClellan out of his camp chair and onto his horse. To that extent, at least, the finding of the lost order was an intelligence coup. The authors, unfortunately, have little to say about — although they do hint at — the effect of earlier, false intelligence reports on the outcome of this battle.¹ Antietam demonstrated the damage that can be done by false intelligence, even long after it is reported.

McClellan's intelligence chief, Allan Pinkerton, had earlier convinced him that Lee's forces greatly outnumbered the Army of the Potomac. Perhaps this false intelligence played in some way on a fatal flaw in McClellan's character. In any case, it had permitted General J. B. Magruder's song-and-dance on the road to Richmond during the earlier Peninsula campaign, when the lines before the Confederate capital were held by Magruder's drum-beating, bugle-blowing companies marching around and about to raise clouds of dust, while Lee shifted the bulk of his forces to McClellan's flank. Bemused by his intelligence service, McClellan saw these play-actors as a vast army.

¹The authors' original manuscript, before it was cut for publication in the *Studies* at the editors' request, did in fact touch on these intelligence failures, referring to the "120,000 seasoned troops which Pinkerton reported to be under Lee's command" and noting that "Lee's soldiers tended to straggle, and Lee never could count effectively at any given moment on more than 75 percent of his total listed force. . . ." — Editor

Communication to the Editors

McClellan's deliberate movement across South Mountain and his slow deployment along Antietam Creek on 16 September show this same fatal psychology at work. Instead of the divisions that peopled McClellan's imagination on 16 September, his host faced not more than 18,000 men, poorly equipped in everything save courage. McClellan simply waited around while Jackson came in from Harper's Ferry. On the following day, the Army of the Potomac paid the bloody price that is sometimes demanded by poor intelligence, and threw away an opportunity to win a decisive victory.

Meanwhile, what of Lee? Several days earlier the Army of Northern Virginia in its turn had been misled by false information: a report that a Union column was advancing south from Chambersburg. Lee's scattered force were further dispersed by the dispatch of Longstreet to hold Hagerstown in the face of this imaginary threat. News of McClellan's unexpected advance beyond Frederick — brought in by J. E. B. Stuart — forced Lee to quick decisions. He moved D. H. Hill back to South Mountain, ordered all units to concentrate at Sharpsburg and urged the quick reduction of Harper's Ferry. Lee's plan at the moment called for retreating his army across the Potomac without giving battle. Only the fall of Harper's Ferry on 15 September and the prospect of rapid concentration of his scattered units decided Lee to make a stand. The final decision to fight at Antietam, therefore, was made by Lee alone.² He was not cornered against the river and forced to fight.

The authors seem to be wrong also in their belief that Lee was spurred to action by knowledge that McClellan had found Special Orders 191. Tradition has it, to be sure, that a citizen of Frederick reported the discovery to Stuart, who passed the information at once to Lee. But the fact is, according to Douglas S. Freeman, the foremost authority on Lee's military career,

²The full version of *Lost Order, Lost Cause* stands in oblique agreement with this last sentence: "Lee's limitations in numbers of men and quantity and quality of equipment were not so great as to encourage him to jettison his original plans. Strategic considerations still remained in favor of the South. . . ." It also takes into consideration one of Mr. Rondeau's later points: "Lee's limitations lay in the bare feet and empty stomachs of his troops. . . . Daily marches of 15 miles on hard, gravelly Maryland roads with a diet of green corn and green apples. . . ." — Editor

Communication to the Editors

that Lee knew nothing of his loss until the publication months later of McClellan's report on the battle (*R. E. Lee*, II, 369, note 72).³ Lee, then, made his decisions in the light of the situation as he saw it, and without knowledge that his order had been lost. That romantic document has had more effect on later generations of scholars than upon the course of events at Antietam.

It is not, in my opinion, correct to consider Antietam an unqualified Union victory. It was, rather, a stalemate. Lee remained on the field, a whole day after the battle, awaiting McClellan's attack. McClellan, in his turn, apparently expected Lee to take the offensive. The retreat across the Potomac resulted from Southern shortage of men and supplies, and from the necessities of maneuver. An army which inflicted on its adversary casualties equal to one-half of its own strength, stayed a day on the battlefield, and then quickly stamped out a timid effort at pursuit was not "sent reeling back into Virginia." The men who went back across the river may have damned "My Maryland," but they did not consider themselves defeated.

Your authors have likewise misinterpreted the significance of Antietam. It was not the high noon of the Confederacy. The Confederate invasion of the North and the Southern cause were doomed to ultimate failure for reasons more prosaic than Yankee gallantry at Sharpsburg. As early as September 1862 the basic cause of the ultimate Southern defeat was foreshadowed in the appearance of the Army of Northern Virginia as it crossed the Potomac: tattered, shoeless men, hungry horses, broken wagons, inadequate artillery. The only neat thing about these storied "tatterdemalions" was their gleaming muskets. On 16 September, while McClellan deployed along

³ Since this letter went to press the writers of *Lost Order, Lost Cause* have called my attention to Douglas Freeman's later conclusion that, during the night of 13-14 September, Stuart had notified Lee of the Federal discovery of S.O. 191 (Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, II, appendix I). I appreciate their correction of my oversight. Lee's knowledge of his loss, however, beyond possibly giving greater urgency to his decisions, seems to have played little part in subsequent events. He made his decision for a stand in Maryland, nevertheless. McClellan and his commanders must bear the responsibility for failure to exploit their intelligence find. — J. R.

Communication to the Editors

Antietam Creek, Lee himself rode down the line to caution his artillery against wasting shells in aimless bombardments. Northern industrial strength, coupled with the blockade of Southern ports (the effects of which were already visible), and later Northern ravaging expeditions brought about ultimate Southern defeat. Antietam, Gettysburg and Vicksburg were not themselves decisive battles, but rather reflected the true cause of growing Southern weakness.

Southern straggling must also be considered in any audit of the books of the first invasion campaign. Thousands of Southern troops did not approve of an invasion of the Union; they had enlisted only to defend their homes. They voted against the campaign simply by remaining behind the river. Other thousands fell out because they could not march on the stone roads of Maryland without shoes. Hard Maryland roads were a major reason for the failure of the first invasion. An army that numbered 53,000 after Second Bull Run could muster less than 40,000 on the Antietam a few weeks later. It is interesting also that the high command of the Army of the Potomac seemed never to take into consideration the mass Southern straggling, at least in Maryland, which must have been evident to many Union sympathizers. Wasn't this, too, a failure of intelligence?

I agree that the Army of Northern Virginia failed to arouse great sympathy among invaded Marylanders. This failure, I think, had three causes: the tattered condition of Lee's army, the route of invasion, and the Union occupation of Maryland. Certainly, many a Marylander must have had second thoughts about joining this ragged horde (a victory for the blockade). The facts of geography dictated that the Army of Northern Virginia should invade Maryland precisely where Union sentiment was strongest. If the invasion could have been mounted to the south and east, its reception might have been different. Demonstrations of such Southern sentiment as existed in Western Maryland were undoubtedly inhibited by fear of future Union reprisals, a factor that Lee himself recognized in his dealings with the inhabitants.

Although not the decisive military conflict that your authors claim it to be, Antietam did play a significant intelligence role. It served as a backdrop for Lincoln's masterpiece of psycholog-

Communication to the Editors

ical warfare: the Emancipation Proclamation. For that reason alone, the war was never the same after this battle had been fought. As Bruce Catton puts it, Antietam sounded forth the bugle that never called retreat. It was, if you will, the psychological watershed of the war. Therein, I think, lies its grip on American imagination.