**American Civil War - Chancellorsville**

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**Chancellorsville Analysis #1 (Slide 2): The Reorganization of the Army of the Potomac (Spring 1863)**

**Background:** Burnside’s tenure at the head of the Army of the Potomac was disappointing. In mid December 1862, the Army of the Potomac’s efforts to dislodge Lee’s army from defensive positions on high ground west of Fredericksburg ended with over 12,600 casualties after several futile attempts to reach Marye’s Heights. A month later, an effort to ford the Rappahannock above Fredericksburg and attack Lee’s flank fell apart when the normally dry weather changed with torrential rain storms. This misfortune turned the route of advance into a quagmire and forced the plan to be abandoned with the inglorious epithet of the “Mud March.” By the end of January, Burnside and several subordinate officers were transferred out of the Army of the Potomac and General Hooker was appointed the army’s new commander. The reason for the Army of the Potomac’s lackluster performance extended beyond the unimaginative tactics and strategy of its previous commanding generals. Severe organizational problems required correction as well.

**Analysis:** As General Hooker saw it, five areas required urgent reform: Span of Control, Logistics and Life Support, Intelligence generating capabilities, Cavalry operations, and Artillery support.

**Span of Control**

Until this point, the Army of the Potomac was built up through the collection of Regiments (approximately the same size of a modern brigade). Regiments were raised either by the efforts of charismatic individuals (who usually also got the job of commanding Colonel) calling for volunteers within different localities of the states (Volunteer units) or by the efforts of the Federal government. Regiments were then grouped with two to four other like units into a Brigade, and then again into Divisions. Usually three divisions formed a Corps. Two or three Corps were grouped into a Grand Division and two to four Grand Divisions made up an army. The Army of the Potomac had four Grand Divisions, consisting of two Corps each.

Upon assumption of command, Hooker was already facing a senior leadership shortage exacerbated by transfer out of several disgruntled senior officers. Hooker was unwilling to “pull-up” from the ranks individuals who while promising were still mastering their current levels of responsibility. Instead, he found a simpler solution that he also believed would make his army more responsive and correct the problems with sluggish communications that had affected previous operations at Fredericksburg. He eliminated the four Grand Division commands and had the eight Corps commanders report directly to him.

In an effort to emphasize this new organizational primacy, promote *esprit de corps* and better unit accountability of both soldiers and equipment, Hooker assigned each Corps a distinctive shaped badge, which was color-coded (red, white, or blue) to reflect which division within that Corps the individual or equipment belonged to. Hooker’s new organization probably did reap benefits at Chancellorsville, but this is hard to measure. Reorganization, though, could not correct shortcoming in leadership or initiative in his subordinates or Hooker himself. (Sears, 61, 63-67)

**Logistics and Life Support**

Other areas requiring reform and new management methods were Quartermaster, Commissary, and Pay (finance) operations. Corruption and bureaucratic bungling had done nearly as much damage to the army as the enemy through demoralization and desertions. Soldiers were eating preserved rations for unnecessarily long periods and degrading their health while fresh provisions and new equipment rotted in government supply points. Hooker ruthlessly demanded that his commanders root out corruption and incompetence with the aid of an enlarged and empowered inspector general department. Lack of pay for many months at a time contributed to desertions by soldiers desperate to get home to take care of their destitute families. Through new regulations and policies with measurable written standards, he made it clear that all aspects of soldier welfare were commanders’ business and set a new standard of leadership for the Army of the Potomac. (Sears, 70-77)

**Intelligence Capabilities**

Hooker realized that part of the Army of the Potomac’s problem with poor distribution of forces and inability to mount rapid responses stemmed from its historic difficulty gathering timely and accurate intelligence about Confederate strengths and positions. Hooker’s development of a comprehensive organization, known as the Bureau of Military Information (BMI), made great advances in sorting and assessing intelligence gathered from a much wider range of sources. This improved capability helped craft a well-founded plan based on Union initiative. While the new system was a great improvement, it was not a cure-all. Commanders still had to incisively reconcile immediate intelligence gathered by their immediate subordinates with the collective picture derived by the new methods. The new intelligence system, much improved as it was, was not able to identify in time Jackson’s rapid movement across Hooker’s front. This undetected movement allowed Jackson to decisively attack the flank of Howard’s Corps on the west side of Chancellorsville. (Sears, 68-70)

**Cavalry Organization**

Part of the reason for the relative success of Confederate cavalry was because they were consolidated at the corps level instead of having smaller units assigned to the control of various divisions and corps. Hooker hoped that by forming all the cavalry in the Army of the Potomac into a single cavalry corps he could get some new benefits from their enhanced *mass*, *mobility*, (*shock*?), and their superior ability to exploit and pursue enemy retreats. Larger cavalry formations could also provide more effective screens, wider reconnaissance missions and conduct strategically significant raids behind enemy lines. For their debut engagement at Chancellorsville, Hooker chose to use the new formation to conduct a raid into the Confederate rear which unfortunately contributed little to advance other Union efforts. Hindsight suggests that any of the other applications of this force might have been more supportive of a more favorable outcome. (Sears, 67)

**Artillery Organization**

Hooker’s reorganization of the artillery was a case of fixing what was not really broken except perhaps politically. His reorganization took the assets that had been previously consolidated at the army level and placed them under the control of the local commanders. Unfortunately, the Army of the Potomac’s chief of artillery was not tactful in his dissent from Hookers plan, and instead of advancing his case on its merits, he caused it be decided on the basis of old loyalties and perceptions – not sound organizational or tactical reasons. (Sears, 68)

**Chancellorsville Analysis #2: (Slide 3) Main vs. Support Effort & Flanking vs. Fixing**

This is a great battle to discuss the several doctrinal terms. Hookers element, while it is impossible to determine if it was considered *the Main Effort* in Hooker’s initial plan (he does not designate it as so, and initially, it is not weighted as such) eventually gains forces to become the *Main Effort*. It also could be termed as a *flanking force* to create a *turning movement*, while Sedgwick’s element is initially clearly the *supporting effort* and a *fixing force*. However, toward the end of the battle, as Sedgwick moves west towards Hookers stagnant element, it would appear that Sedgwick’s VI Corps becomes the *main effort*. The instructor can discuss what makes a *main effort*, and if Sedgwick’s element was truly the *main effort* in the end, even though he had a minority of the forces.

**Chancellorsville Analysis #3: (Slide 5) Why did Hooker and Howard misinterpret Lee’s flanking movement across their front?**

**Background:** When Lee directed Jackson to take his forces on a cross-front march to the west to find Hooker’s right flank, they chose the best possible route by paying careful attention to the terrain features that could mask their movement They also enforced good march discipline (no cadences or singing), and maximized the use of cavalry screening capabilities. By working these techniques effectively together they were able to conduct their movement in near perfect secrecy with the exception of a short crossing near Catherine Furnace, which required passage through a clearing that was visible to some Federal elements.

Weather conditions also aided Confederates. Recently rain-moistened roads made for near perfect marching conditions as no observable dust column was kicked up and the sponginess of the damp dirt road surface muffled their steps. Furthermore, stiff winds at balloon observation heights rendered this important reconnaissance tool useless to the Federals.

Despite their excellent techniques and discipline there were a few indicators of Confederate intentions and movements that the Union army was unable to or failed to take advantage of.

**Analysis:** One of thefactors that contributed to Hooker and Howard misinterpreting Jackson’s movement was curiously the one place where Jackson could not mask his movement -- the Catherine Furnace clearing. The glimpses gained from the Federals position suggested that the Confederates were moving southward. When no signs of them emerged in the west, Union leadership *presumed* that they had continued southward away from the Federals positions to Todds Tavern and Orange Court House. Reinforcing this erroneous assumption was the fact that no news had been received from Stoneman’s Cavalry Corps which was conducting raiding missions towards Richmond. In the absence of news, it was *presumed* that the Federal cavalry was having an effect and causing the Confederates to withdraw in that direction to respond to the cavalry threat. Inadvertently adding to the Federal’s misperception was a garbled verbal order from Lee to Early that caused Early to start moving in such a way and time that it appeared to and was interpreted by Federal observers that Early was also moving away from the front to respond to a threat closer to Richmond.

Compounding the problem was the mindset of many of the senior leaders, including Hooker, Howard, and subordinate division commanders. They had locked on to this particular interpretation of unfolding events and refused to consider or even pass up through the chain of command new information from subordinates that could challenge their cherished perceptions which, if competently synthesized, could have given them a truer picture of the dire events unfolding.

(Sears, 244, 250, 256, 264-271)

**Chancellorsville Analysis #4: (Slide 6) Why was Sedgwick slow to act?**

By May of 1863, Sedgwick was already a tried military campaigner. The previous summer he was wounded at Frayser’s Farm and again, three more times, at the battle of Antietam in the fall. Chancellorsville, however, was Sedgwick’s first independent Corps command. Previously he had been able to aggressively execute direct and easily understood orders at a lower level. Chancellorsville, however, presented Sedgwick the new task of independent thought, and having to attempt to determine and appropriately act upon what Hooker’s intent was. When he received orders to move his unit at his discretion (a directive intended to let him take the offensive initiative without waiting for further authority if he saw an opportunity), he interpreted the orders as permission to stay put until specifically ordered to move. Because Sedgwick had not participated in the planning process, Hooker’s intent of encouraging his initiative was lost to him.

(Warner, *Blue*, 430-431; Sears, 215-216, 304, 312, 325)

**Chancellorsville Analysis #5: (Slide 6) Why did Hooker lose the initiative?**

Prior to 1 May, Hooker was on the *Offensive* and thus retained the initiative. His maneuver to turn Lee’s army out of their Fredericksburg positions had worked superbly and forced Lee to react to Hooker’s movement. But once Lee made initial contact with Hooker’s Main Body on 1 May, everything changed. Hooker handed the initiative over to Lee, who understood the importance of the Principle of *Offensive*, and never gave it back to the Army of the Potomac. There were several examples of Hookers voluntary violation of *Offensive* throughout the battle.

1 May Meeting Engagement: Hooker clearly had a missed opportunity as the forces came in contact to the east of Chancellorsville. As XII and V Corps met the Confederates along Turnpike and Plank Roads, Meade’s northern Force was without opposition. This force was in a perfect position to conduct a flanking maneuver on Lee’s Main Body. Hooker, however, withdrew back to Chancellorsville to construct defensive works. It had always been Hooker’s intention of meeting Lee on the ground of his own choosing. Apparently, Hooker hastily chose the ground around Chancellorsville, and then expected Lee to attack it. Lee, however, not only understood Offensive, but also understood Mass. Instead of throwing his forces against a superior army (both in numbers and in protected positions), he decided to Mass his small army against an even smaller, exposed Union position, the Union right flank (XI Corps).

2 May – Jackson’s Flank Attack. While on a whole, Hooker’s reorganization of the Cavalry Corps was the correct solution to the Union Cavalry deficiency of the past, his further decision to send the majority of it on an ineffectual raid to the south only served to deny the Army of the Potomac much needed intelligence. Hooker’s defensive position at Chancellorsville was highly dependent on having continuous, accurate, near real-time intelligence about his enemy’s dispositions and movements, so that the overwhelming Federal forces could be repositioned as required. This necessary condition was missing on 2 May, and thus allowed Jackson to be able to slip his corps into the Union right flank undetected. Through audacious and masterful *maneuver*, Jackson was able to gain the valuable advantage of *surprise.*

3 May – Withdrawal from Hazel Grove. The rout that followed left Union leadership scrambling to reestablish a defensible line. In that scramble, the Union forces ill-advisedly ceded particularly precious high ground for artillery operations at both Hazel Grove and Fairview, which Confederate artillerists promptly put to most effective use. Compounding the Union troubles was the lack of a centralized coordinator of artillery assets, able to efficiently exchange batteries between corps and reserve assets as required. (This was the fallout of Hooker’s much earlier and ill-advised decision to snub the arrogant but competent Henry Hunt, the former Chief of Artillery of the Army of the Potomac, through the abolition of his position.) The result at Chancellorsville was when corps commanders lost their artillery assets, there was no effective method for them to request replacement assets or fire support from sister units. While Hooker understandably was concerned for the safety of his exposed III Corps that was between two confederate forces, the loss of this high ground continued the Union reaction to the Confederate action – The initiative was kept by the Confederates.

This initiative could have been retrieved by utilizing V Corp to attack Stuart’s Left flank that afternoon, but no such effort was made. Because he perceived there was no more threat to his left flank, Lee was able to successfully shift his forces toward his right flank, re-uniting his forces and covering McLaws’ and Anderson’s departure to support Early at Fredericksburg. Hooker’s inability to take advantage of his greater numbers again allowed Lee to move forces to the area they were most needed, and massing against isolated Union efforts (much like he did at Antietam).

Hooker himself was physically incapacitated when a shell hit his headquarters near where he was standing. He was knocked unconscious and shell-shocked for the next several critical hours on the morning of 3 May. Since it was not clear to what degree Hooker was mentally affected, he remained in command, though apparently unable to render important decisions in a timely manner that might have retained or even regained some initiative for the Federals.

3 May – Sedgwick’s Advance. Finally, Sedgwick’s planned movement through Fredericksburg and into Lee’s rear did not occur as Hooker had intended because of Sedgwick’s lack of initiative and slow movement on to and then from Marye’s Heights. This delay (combined with the above stated inactivity of the Union Main Body) gave Lee the time he needed to transfer McLaws’ and Anderson’s units to Early.

Collectively all of these developments caused the Army of the Potomac to lose the initiative and render it unable to *mass* for a decisive strike at Lee’s army.

(Sears, 304, 312-313, 333, 338-339, 347-348, 357-359)