

A THICK BLANKET OF HEAT SMOTHERED THE FIELDS AND woods around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of July 3, 1863. The brutal and unforgiving sun seemed to have completely sapped the air of its oxygen. In this stifling environment, anxious Confederate foot soldiers under Major General George E. Pickett and Brigadier General James J. Pettigrew crouched behind the crest of a rise locals called Seminary Ridge, and waited for the artillery to open what would become the most celebrated charge of the Civil War. A signal gun fired, and the Rebel cannon—some 170 of them—erupted, bearing down on the Union center along Cemetery Ridge about a mile away.

The pyrotechnic display that followed captured the imagination of Union and Confederate soldiers, not for its accuracy or destructiveness, but for its powerful visual and sound effects. "It was the most terrific and deafening artillery fight of the war," wrote one Southern gunner. "Such cannonading as was on that day, was never heard before on the American continent."

Ironically, the intensity of the barrage served only to mask its utter ineffectiveness. The rapidly-firing guns produced so much smoke that Southern officers had no idea that most of their rounds were sailing harmlessly over the Federal line. One Union soldier reported that Lee's artillery "was by no means as effective as it should have been, ninety months of their shot passing over our men. Officers tell me that the case and pieces of shell came down like hail, so high over their head [that] they did not burst."

When the cannonade subsided, the Confederate infantrymen emerged from the woods of Seminary Ridge and, in perfect formations, marched into the very teeth of the Union defense. Blasts of canister from the perfectly placed and amply supplied Federal guns joined with volleys of musketry to shatter the neatly dressed Rebel lines and crush the soldiers who made them up. Survivors streamed back to Seminary Ridge, greeted by General Robert E. Lee, commander of their Army of Northern Virginia. Lee spoke warmly but firmly to them, asking them to form ranks and prepare to throw back an anticipated counterattack. In one of the noblest gestures of the war, he apologized to Pettigrew's and Pickett's men for their frightful losses and assumed full responsibility for the disastrous charge. The day, the battle, and the great Confederate invasion of the North were lost.

What Lee did not apologize for that day was the real reason that Pettigrew's and Pickett's men had been doomed, and had endured such hopeless slaughter: the loud, spectacular, but futile cannonade that had left the Union line unharmed, strong, and virtually invincible. The cannonade's failure was not due to any lack of skill or energy on the part of Lee's artilleryists. Who, then, was at fault for the bombardment's worthlessness—and the resulting failure of Pickett's Charge?

Many complicated and interconnected factors conspired against Confederate artillery on the battle's final day. At the most fundamental level, an organizational flaw left the artillery commanders of Lee's three corps to function independently, with no provision for operating in conjunction with one another. Lee could have resolved this glitch in his

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WHO'S TO BLAME?

Who deserves the blame for the Confederate loss at Gettysburg? Not the usual scapegoat

PETER S. CARMICHAEL



chain of command, but at Gettysburg, he opted to maintain the status quo, essentially leaving the disposition of his guns to the man who—in name, at least—was the army's chief of artillery: Brigadier General William Nelson Pendleton. And under Pendleton, the three corps' artillery commanders were left entirely to their own devices.

Pendleton's reputation for incompetence rivaled no other in the Army of Northern Virginia. Although a West Pointer and qualified on paper for his high post, he repeatedly floundered on battlefields. Rumors after the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861 alleged that he had covered under enemy fire. During the Seven Days' Battles in the summer of 1862 he seemingly disappeared with the Reserve Artillery at Malvern Hill. Less than a year later, in May 1863, his fellow officers criticized his tactical judgment at the Second Battle of Fredericksburg. He committed his greatest blunder while commanding the Confederate rear guard after the September 1862 Battle of Antietam. Not far from Shepherdstown, western Virginia, a small Union force crossed the Potomac River, stormed the Rebel position, and nearly captured 33 of the Reserve Artillery's guns, an embarrassment that caused considerable controversy in Lee's ranks.



TURNER COLLECTION

Thompson Brown's guns of Lieutenant General Richard Ewell's 2d Corps north of Cemetery Hill, at the northern end of Cemetery Ridge, could have raked the Union line along the ridge while the batteries of the 1st and 3d Corps struck the Federal front. This would have produced a damaging, if not crippling, crossfire that would have substantially weakened the Union center. The Federal artillery would have had to return fire (which they quickly ceased to do during the inconsequential Confederate cannonade) thereby significantly reducing the amount of ordnance left to fire at the charging Rebel infantry. It is impossible to say whether a flanking fire from the Southern guns would have secured Confederate victory on July 3, but one thing is clear: the failure to use the 2d Corps artillery north of Cemetery Hill sealed the fate of Pickett and Pettigrew's charge.

Even the massing of more than 170 guns in front of Cemetery Ridge did not produce a concentrated fire. After the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, in April 1865, Union artillery Brigadier General Henry J. Hunt conversed with Brigadier General Armistead L. Long of Lee's staff about Pickett's charge. Hunt recalled that the Rebel artillery fire, "instead of being concentrated on the point of attack, as it ought to have been, and as I expected it would be, was scattered over the field." Long seemed amused by the criticism and replied that "when the fire became so scattered, [I] wondered what you would think about it!" But without central coordination, the fire was bound to be scattered. The shape of Lee's line had the Rebel batteries oriented in such a way that they ended up firing along a straight line toward Cemetery Ridge. Add to this the fact that the Union line was very thin and was stretched along the slender crest of the ridge, and the likelihood of the Confederate guns doing much harm became slim indeed.

Although Pendleton lacked direct line authority to move individual batteries—that power belonged to the corps commanders—he had the power and responsibility to define the artillery's role in the overall tactical scheme. As chief of artillery, he surveyed the entire field and should have seen the best opportunities to employ Lee's ordnance. Before Pickett's Charge, the corps artillery commander controlled over the artillery in battle. While this was a sound decision, Lee should have directed another officer to define the overall tactical role of the artillery. Without centralized leadership from above, Lee's artillery struggled constantly to operate as a cohesive force on the battlefield. In most battle situations, there was no need for the artillery chiefs of the different corps to worry about coordinating their fire. But the fishhook-shaped Union line at Gettysburg presented a unique opportunity for such collaboration. A concentrated deployment of Colonel J.



TURNER COLLECTION

The blame for the Southern army's crushing defeat on July 3 could fall on any number of Confederates, such as General Robert E. Lee (top), or maybe William Nelson Pendleton (above), Lee's incompetent chief of artillery.

and two different corps to subordinate who had neither the authority nor the initiative to resolve these complicated issues. Lee's disconnectedness from the battlefield puzzled Alexander, who wrote that "it must be remembered that the preparations for this charge were made deliberately, & under the observation of Gen. Lee himself, & of all of his staff." At the very least, Alexander insisted, Lee should have taken "an interest... in seeing that the troops who were to support the charge were in position to do it." Lieutenant General James Longstreet, commander of the 1st Corps, echoed Alexander's concerns, criticizing Lee for not giving the "benefit of his presence and his assistance in getting the troops up, posting them, and arranging the batteries...; he gave no orders or suggestions after his early designation of the point for which the column should march."

Lee's hands-off approach had produced stellar results at the Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862 and the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863. But those brilliant feats had been achieved largely by subordinates who firmly believed in Lee's overall strategy. At Gettysburg, Longstreet did not share Lee's faith in the tactical offensive. Instead of relentlessly pursuing Lee's orders on July 3, he tried to force his responsibilities on Alexander, a mere colonel of artillery. Before the bombardment commenced, Alexander was instructed to judge the fire's effect and determine the optimal moment for Pickett to advance. Alexander estimated it would take some 20 to 30 minutes of firing before Pickett should advance. "I had no expectation whatever of seeing anything special happen in the enemy during the cannonade," the Georgian wrote, "either to make me lengthen or shorten this period." The enemy's superior weaponry, ammunition, and position should have tempered Alexander's confidence, but "the fact is that like all the rest of the army I believed that it would come out right, because Gen. Lee had planned it."

Just before the bombardment commenced, Alexander received a troubling note from Longstreet. In the dispatch, the 1st Corps commander tried to shift the burden of the assault on Alexander. He instructed the artillery to call off Pickett's advance if the Confederate cannonade did not drive off or demoralize the enemy. "That presented the whole business to me in a new light," a shocked Alexander admitted. "It was no longer Gen. Lee's inspiration... but my cold judgment to be founded on what I was going to see." Alexander realized that he could not fulfill Longstreet's request. Once the

manders had no time to examine each other's ground for possible cooperative action. Only Pendleton could have orchestrated a combined artillery attack.

Colonel Edward Porter Alexander, the young and gifted artilleryist from Georgia acting as artillery chief of the 1st Corps, blamed Pendleton for not using more 2d Corps guns north of Cemetery Hill to enfilade the Union center. "The great criticism which I have to make on the artillery operations of the day," remarked Alexander, "is upon the inaction of the artillery of Ewell's Corps." Alexander claimed that he knew only "his own ground" and "had but the vaguest notion of where Ewell's corps was. And Ewell's chief doubtless had as vague ideas of my situation & necessities." Gen. Lee's chief should have known, Alexander averred, "as given every possible energy to improve the rare & great chance to the very utmost." With the luxury of hindsight, Alexander concluded after the war that Pendleton's "neglect" to use Ewell's batteries "was a serious loss. Every map of the field cries out about it."

Only one of the five 2d Corps artillery battalions fired at the shank of the fishhook to achieve a cross fire with the batteries on Seminary Ridge. Ewell's enfilading fire lasted briefly—no more than a few dozen shots were exchanged—but they achieved spectacular results. The Federal line quivered as Confederate rounds slammed into the flanks of the Union regiments and batteries on Cemetery Hill. Major General Oliver O. Howard reported that "shells burst in the air, in the ground to the right and left, killing horses, exploding caissons, overturning tombstones, and smashing fences. There was no place killed and wounded by one shell." If Alexander was so effusive about the possibilities of bringing the full power of Ewell's ordnance against Cemetery Ridge.

Not only did Pendleton squander the opportunity to use Ewell's guns, Lee did nothing to intervene and remedy the situation. Although the commanding general rode along the lines from dawn to the start of the attack, he left questions of joint action between two different arms of service unanswered. Perhaps Major General George Pickett (above) was at fault. His charge failed to break through the Union line, but only after ammunition-storved cannoners commanded by Colonel Edward Porter Alexander (top) missed their mark.



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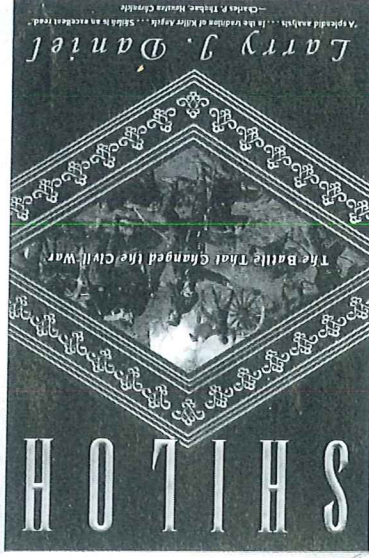


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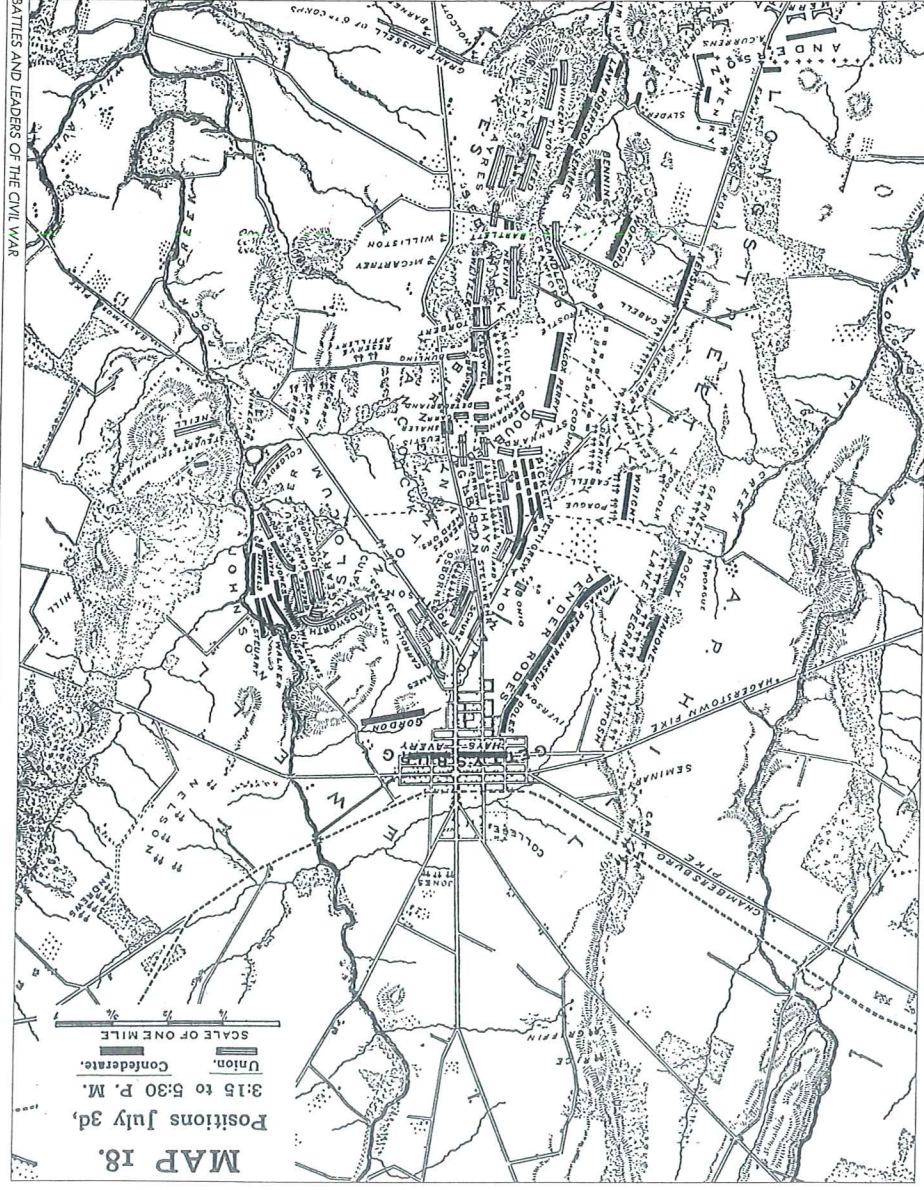
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BATTLES AND LEADERS OF THE CIVIL WAR

The guns of Ewell's 2d Corps were perfectly poised to rake the Union line, as seen in this map, but lack of cohesive direction of Lee's artillery resulted in a lost opportunity.

Any possibility of Alexander collaborating with the 3d Corps artillery chief, Colonel Reuben Lindsay Walker, ended when Longstreet required his artilleryist to decide the timing of the infantry assault. Alexander spent his remaining time before the attack consulting with Pickett and Longstreet, never communicating with Walker before the cannonade. The only discussion of cooperative action occurred during an early morning conference in which Pendleton offered Alexander nine howitzers from the 3d Corps. These guns, under Major Charles Richardson, lacked sufficient range to participate in the preliminary bombardment, so Walker told Pendleton that he had no use for

cannonade began, the resulting smoke would make it difficult to determine whether the enemy guns had been silenced, the deciding factor in sending the infantry forward. The impasse between Longstreet and Alexander was broken when the artilleryist reminded himself that “Lee had originally planned” the attack and “half the day had been spent in preparation.” He did not want to cause a “loss of time by any indecision on my part.” He sent Longstreet a final reply: “General. When our artillery fire is at its best I shall order Gen. Pickett to charge.” For an attack that faced nearly insurmountable odds, the most difficult in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia, neither Lee nor Longstreet left their

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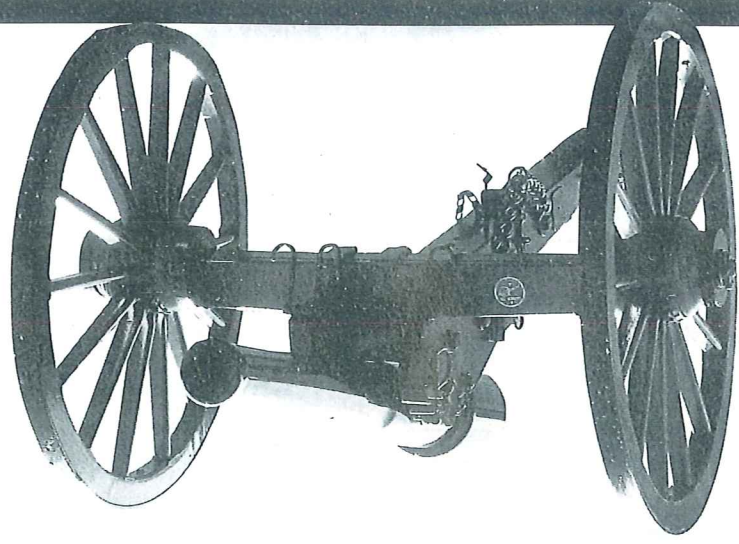
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them. When Pendleton asked Alexander if he could use them, the Georgian "jumped at the idea, & thanked him & said, 'yes, I had the very place for them.'" Alexander decided to hold Richardson's cannon out of the bombardment, keeping the guns "under cover & but of view, so that with fresh men, & uninjured horses, & full chests of ammunition, these nine light howitzers might follow Pickett's infantry in the charge." Alexander directed Richardson's battery to a protective hollow behind some woods with explicit orders to wait until ordered forward.

Alexander had devised an ingenious scheme for using Richardson's howitzers, but for some reason he failed to relate the details to Pendleton. Problems were the inevitable result. Just before the bombardment, Alexander sent a staff officer to move Richardson's batteries closer to the front lines, but neither men or cannon could be found. When the staff officer reported the guns missing, an agitated Alexander replied sternly: "He [Richardson] would not dare to leave there without orders. You go again & find him & don't you come back without him." Again the staff officer reported that he could not locate the pieces, and because Alexander had no time to replace the missing cannon, he scrapped the plan. After the battle Alexander discovered that Pendleton had removed at least four pieces without informing anyone of the change. The remaining pieces, Richardson admitted, were moved a short distance to the rear because of enemy fire.

Richardson's seeming disobedience so infuriated Alexander that he considered preferring charges against the major. In a postwar letter, Alexander hinted at the difficulty of cooperating with artillery battalions outside his own corps: "I feel bitterly about that day. It was such a beautiful chance to handle the loss of Richardson's guns [the bombardment, Alexander sent a staff officer to move Richardson's batteries closer to the front lines, but neither men or cannon could be found. When the staff officer reported the guns missing, an agitated Alexander replied sternly: "He [Richardson] would not dare to leave there without orders. You go again & find him & don't you come back without him." Again the staff officer reported that he could not locate the pieces, and because Alexander had no time to replace the missing cannon, he scrapped the plan. After the battle Alexander discovered that Pendleton had removed at least four pieces without informing anyone of the change. The remaining pieces, Richardson admitted, were moved a short distance to the rear because of enemy fire.

Not only had Pendleton interfered with Alexander's plan for Richardson's guns; he also got in the way when he moved Longstreet's reserve artillery train farther behind the lines. Such a move might have been necessary, because enemy rounds posed an occasional threat, but the added distance between the wagons and the guns made it impossible to efficiently refill the limber chests. Just as he had failed to inform Alexander about moving Richardson's guns, Pendleton also overlooked the necessity of telling his subordinates that their ordnance wagons had been relocated. Much confusion arose and time was wasted as men searched for their elusive wagons. Many of Alexander's gunners who quickly burned their long-range shot and shell could only stand by idly and watch the end of the cannonade and the ensuing charge. When Longstreet encountered a battery "spoke at once, & decidedly, 'Go ahead Pickett right where he is, & replenish your ammunition.'" Alexander strongly objected. "We can't do that," he protested. "We nearly emptied the trains last night. Even if we sponded that 'the caissons had been away nearly three-quarters of an hour, and there was a rumor that General Pendleton had sent the reserve artillery ammunition more than a mile in rear of the field.'"

Responsibility for the ammunition troubles should not fall entirely on Pendleton's shoulders. Neither Longstreet nor Lee sufficiently concerned themselves with this matter. If their subordinates had reported warning ammunition levels, they should have taken the initiative and looked into the matter. Moreover, both officers knew that an unguarded wagon road connected the army to its arsenals and depots at Staunton, Virginia, some 200 miles to the south. Not until Pickett's men began their advance did Longstreet check supply levels. When Alexander blamed the wavering artillery fire on low ammunition, Longstreet "spoke at once, & decidedly, 'Go ahead Pickett right where he is, & replenish your ammunition.'" Alexander strongly objected. "We can't do that," he protested. "We nearly emptied the trains last night. Even if we sponded that 'the caissons had been away nearly three-quarters of an hour, and there was a rumor that General Pendleton had sent the reserve artillery ammunition more than a mile in rear of the field.'"

In his official Gettysburg report, Lee admitted that the artillery's ammunition troubles were "unknown to me" before and after the cannonade. Why he did not anticipate problems remains a mystery, considering that the army had been heavily engaged for two days. His negligence is especially difficult to explain because he had stated that Pickett's assault depended on a well sustained, closely supported artillery barrage. Such a massive cannonade would, by definition, devour sizable quantities of ammunition. In contrast, the Union Army of the Potomac's commander, Major General George G. Meade, indicated that Pickett's staff supplies Thomas J. Gore of Longstreet's staff wrote of Pendleton: "Although nominally Chief of Artillery, yet he was in the actual capacity of Ordnance Officer, and, as I believe, miles in the rear, had it, it would take an hour or two, & meanwhile the enemy would recover from the pressure he is now under." Before the two officers parted, Alexander made a final appeal: "Our only chance is to follow it up now—to ment before Pickett's charge stemmed, then, from an organizational problem that discouraged cooperative action among artillery officers of various corps. This technical problem muted the firepower of Lee's long arm, resulting in Ewell's guns missing a magnificent opportunity to enfilade Meade's line. As Lee's artillery chief, Pendleton had the power to overcome this structural flaw. Resourceful leadership could have brought union to his command on July 3, but Pendleton too often assumed a passive approach. On the two occasions he took decisive action—moving Richardson's guns and the 1st Corps ordnance wagons—the effects proved detrimental. In regards to Gettysburg, Alexander had devised an ingenious scheme for using Richardson's howitzers, but for some reason he failed to relate the details to Pendleton. Problems were the inevitable result. Just before the bombardment, Alexander sent a staff officer to move Richardson's batteries closer to the front lines, but neither men or cannon could be found. When the staff officer reported the guns missing, an agitated Alexander replied sternly: "He [Richardson] would not dare to leave there without orders. You go again & find him & don't you come back without him." Again the staff officer reported that he could not locate the pieces, and because Alexander had no time to replace the missing cannon, he scrapped the plan. After the battle Alexander discovered that Pendleton had removed at least four pieces without informing anyone of the change. The remaining pieces, Richardson admitted, were moved a short distance to the rear because of enemy fire.

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In the end, however, Lee was the commanding general on the field. He possessed the authority to dictate affairs, to coordinate the actions of two different corps, and to ensure that his subordinates executed his orders for an attack that he considered the defining moment of his army, the battle, and possibly the war. So, while many people played a part in the charges failure, and while Pendleton was the person most directly responsible for the failure of the cannonade that could have made the charge successful, Robert E. Lee must bear the burden for not organizing and overseeing his command structure for success. **CWT**

I know that I did not see him on the field during the battle. It was a notorious fact and general[ly] remarked that he was almost entirely ignored by Genl. Lee, as Chief of Artillery, and the management of it given to the Corps Chiefs of Artillery." Lee should never have allowed a man so stupidously incompetent as Pendleton to manage the artillery, especially in a high-pressure situation like that at Gettysburg. He should either have compensated for his subordinate's shortcomings or shielded the army from him. But Lee did neither. He, in fact, seemed oblivious to his artillery at Gettysburg. This unconscionable oversight alone nearly doomed the charge. To make matters worse, he distanced himself from the charge by giving Longstreet too much control over the preparations of the attack. Although the defensive tactic that Longstreet repeatedly urged Lee to adopt might have been the best course for the army, his duty as corps commander demanded that he energetically fulfill Lee's instructions. Trying to shift the onus of the charge onto Porter Alexander ranks as Longstreet's most insubordinate act at Gettysburg, far more serious than his controversial behavior on July 2.

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