

Tradecraft and Technology – Intelligence in the Civil War

Lecture Four: Lee vs. Hooker at Chancellorsville Better Intelligence Doesn't Guarantee Success

A. Hooker and Lee Developed Strategies for Spring 1863 Campaigns

- Hooker planned to move around Lee's left flank. It was designed to force Lee to fight or retreat. Accurate, timely intelligence was critical to surprise and to success.
- Lee contemplated an offensive move into Maryland; but two divisions were sent on detached service, forcing him to delay his plans.
- Lee & Hooker employed similar intelligence gathering techniques: 1) Signal Corps observations & intercepts; 2) press reporting; 3) cavalry; and 4) Scouts/Spies. Hooker has the advantage only in balloon reconnaissance.
- Lee enjoyed the "home field advantage." Sympathetic Virginia civilians and Stuart's cavalry provided steady stream of reporting.

B. Union BMI Activities Began to Show Results

- BMI was still in formative stages; but recruited a few civilian spies, like Isaac Silver.
- BMI scouts penetrated Rebel camps; contrabands provided valuable intelligence.
- On 12 April, Confederates intercepted a fake Union signal flag report about a fictitious Union cavalry advance toward the Shenandoah Valley
- Lee was fooled by the report & ordered Stuart's cavalry to intercept; leaving a 20-mile gap in the cavalry screen on his left flank.
- A 15 April report from civilian Isaac Silver revealed a 5-mile gap in Lee's defenses near Kelly's Ford – exactly where Hooker planned to cross the Rappahannock River.
- On 28 April, the BMI estimate placed Lee's strength at 55,300 (off by only 2 percent). This meant that the Union army outnumbered the Confederates more than 2:1.
- On 29 April, 3 Union Corps crossed the Rappahannock, surprising Stuart and Lee; and moved to threaten the rear of Lee's army.

C. Chancellorsville Campaign: Hooker Proved that Effective Intelligence Only Wins Battles in Competent Hands.

- Hooker sent Stoneman's cavalry corps on a raid against Lee's supply lines, which left Hooker without cavalry reporting for the next 10 critical days.
- Lee was confused about Hooker's intentions and delayed actions to meet the threat.
- Finally, on 30 April, Lee realized the danger and moved most of his army into the Wilderness to meet Hooker.

D. Chancellorsville, 1 May: Hooker & Sedgwick Fail To Act on Intelligence

- On 1 May, Lee attacked first. Hooker halted his advance & withdrew into defensive positions around the Chancellorsville crossroads.
- Hooker's caution was caused by misinterpretation of intelligence from several sources.
- Sedgwick at Fredericksburg feared Confederate deception; decided not to attack.

E. Chancellorsville, 2-6 May: Lee Made Best Use of Intelligence; Won Major Victory

- Lee took the offensive: Sent Jackson on a sweeping move around Hooker's right flank.
- Hooker received, misinterpreted timely warning of Confederate moves.
- Jackson's flanking attack succeeded brilliantly, although Jackson was wounded.

F. Lessons Learned

- Despite his successful flanking move and a 2:1 numerical advantage, Hooker suffered a major defeat, caused by poor leadership and decision-making.
- Under Col. Sharpe's leadership the BMI continued to improve its tradecraft – setting the stage for a Union success story: timely, accurate intelligence put to effective use during the Gettysburg campaign.

G. Union Bureau of Military Information (BMI) Comes of Age

- CIA Historian: "The first all-source intelligence organization in U.S. history was created during the Civil War (in 1863) by George H. Sharpe. He... pioneered the fundamental principles of modern intelligence analysis and organization that remains valid to this day."
- Sharpe pioneered the modern practices of utilizing a broad range of information sources; validating these sources; and producing comparative, all-source analysis that provided the "so what" to customers. He clearly saw his job as telling it like it is – rather than telling it like the commander wanted to hear.