

Letters from our readers

10 January 2013

On “ Obama administration blocks information request on assassination of US citizens ”

At least one can honestly say that the Obama Administration is fully democratic: it does not care whom it kills, tortures or throws into prison, American or not! They are all equal. What can be fairer than that? The rich and powerful being exempt, of course, as they are the key to “national security,” after all.

Mirek
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8 January 2013

On “ 150 years since the Battle of Antietam ”

I recently re-read the excellent article by Tom Mackaman on the Battle of Antietam, which led to the Emancipation Proclamation. One aspect of the war that is highlighted in this battle, and is often overlooked, is that the Confederacy’s leadership had inherent self-destructive tendencies. General Lee made some strategic blunders leading up to this battle that affected its outcome, mistakes that he never made when fighting in the south. The most critical of these involved the location of the Antietam battlefield; it was backed up against a bend in the Potomac River, which prevented Lee from using the mobile tactics he had used with great success in campaigns on southern territory. There were many other locations in Maryland that would have been better suited to Confederate success.

Similarly, in the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania a year later, in July 1863, Lee again made some errors that he did not make when fighting in the south. He did not have to fight at Gettysburg, particularly after the first day of that battle, when Union forces coalesced into a tremendously strong defensive position. He could have disengaged his army and moved to a more advantageous position, saving them to fight another day. Once again, Lee fought a battle that he did not have to fight, and destroyed the Confederate army’s offensive capabilities. While the Confederates were able to continue fighting effectively on the

defensive for almost two more years, they were never again able to mount a large-scale offensive.

When fighting in the north, when there was a hint of battle in the air, Lee’s usually sound military thinking abandoned him, and he committed his forces to battles that did not have to be fought (from a southern perspective) at those particular times. The fact that Lee made these critical errors points to flaws in his (and by extension, the leadership of the Confederacy’s) thinking, and to some contradictions that played out in his mind. First of all, there was Lee’s extreme aggressiveness. This characteristic was common among members of the Planter class in the south (of which Lee was a member). They developed this trait because they needed to completely dominate every aspect of the slaves’ lives, in order to prevent rebellions, and to keep the slaves working. The Planter class was predisposed to militarism and violence. This aggressiveness helped Lee when he was fighting on southern territory, but while there he was able to control this impulse. When fighting in the north, his better judgment abandoned him, and he fell back on his instincts.

Lee undertook both invasions of the north because he believed that, in spite of the south’s numerous victories over northern forces, they would not win the war without taking the conflict into the north. This strategy conflicted with the Confederacy’s stated war aims of fighting a defensive war against “northern aggression.” This contradiction must have played out in Lee’s mind, and helps to explain why Lee made the mistakes that he did.

These military errors on the part of Lee were a crucial factor in the Union’s ultimate victory, but were not the decisive factor. The south still could have won the war, were it not for the extraordinary leadership that Lincoln provided. Lincoln kept the Union focused, and he was not afraid to fire ineffective and incompetent generals. The south’s leadership could not have anticipated what Lincoln brought to the conflict, and were overmatched

by him.

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