Robert Todd Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Story”

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Robert Todd Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln’s oldest son, was a student at Harvard during most of the Civil War. On July 1–3, 1863, when Union forces under General George G. Meade stopped the northern advance of General Robert E. Lee’s Confederate forces at the Battle of Gettysburg, “Bob” Lincoln had finished his spring semester at Harvard and was free to travel elsewhere. He reached the White House on July 14, just as the president learned that Meade had failed to engage Lee’s broken army before it crossed the Potomac River back into Virginia. Bob found his father with “tears upon his face,” his composure shattered by Lee’s escape.

Vicksburg, the Confederate stronghold in the West, had fallen to General Ulysses S. Grant’s forces on July 4. As Lincoln wrote to General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck on July 7, in a letter transmitted to Meade, if Meade “can complete his work” at Gettysburg “by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee’s army, the rebellion will be over.” When Meade was closing in on Lee, the president “felt sure that the final blow could be struck.” However, as one of Lincoln’s secretaries later wrote, Meade let Lee slip across the Potomac “without serious molestation.”

On July 14 Lincoln wrote Meade of his dismay at Lee’s unimpeded crossing of the Potomac: “I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee’s escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. . . . Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.” On second thought, Lincoln set this letter aside, having “never sent, or

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Robert Lincoln never forgot his conversation with his father after Lee’s escape. It was one of “several occasions” when the president, “in his desire to unburden himself to someone in whom he could have entire confidence,” gave his son “brief statements of the condition of things which were very much bothering him.” It was Robert’s “very great regret,” however, that he “kept no notes” of those conversations. “I ought to have jotted them down so that my memory of them could be more trusted than is now possible.” In particular, Robert recalled “a communication” from his father to Meade after the Battle of Gettysburg “which is most vividly impressed upon my mind but,” he added, “I never was able to convince Mr. Nicolay that I was not in error; he insisting that there was no record to sustain me at all.” Others, notably Gabor S. Boritt, have grappled with the nature and circumstances of Lincoln’s “communication” with Meade, but a close reading of the evidence, both available and newly discovered, makes possible a fuller account of what Robert Lincoln called his “Gettysburg story.”3

Over the years, Robert Lincoln repeatedly spoke about his meeting with his father on July 14, 1863. There is no exact consistency in either what he wrote about that conversation or what others wrote about it after talking with him, but a chronological review of the evidence may


For ample evidence of Lincoln’s closeness to his oldest son, see Jason Emerson, Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012).
have a place in the vast literature on the Battle of Gettysburg. From the start, Robert himself was uncertain about his own memory of his conversation with his father: did the president himself at that time order Meade to reengage Lee? Whatever the case, Robert was careful never to become entangled in the conflicting assessments of command decisions at Gettysburg and in Washington. Unlike scores of his contemporaries, he had no desire to shape the historical understanding of the battle and its aftermath. He was temperamentally reticent to engage in public controversy.4

Apparently the first of the many accounts of Robert Lincoln’s recollection of his conversation with his father in mid-1863 is a memorandum written by Rush C. Hawkins, colonel of the Ninth New York Infantry (the “Hawkins Zouaves”). Lincoln, on a European tour in 1872, met Hawkins, the U.S. consul at Hombourg-les-Bains, Prussia. “I have been with Robert Lincoln, son of our late President, for the past two hours,” Hawkins recorded. “During our conversation,” he stated he “had never seen his father cry but once,” and that was after the Battle of Gettysburg. As Hawkins understood it, the president’s telegram to Meade read as follows: “You will follow up and attack Genl. Lee as soon as possible before he can cross the river. If you fail this dispatch will clear you from all responsibility and if you succeed you may destroy it.” Lincoln’s order not only directed Meade to pursue Lee but also included an unusual contingency, whether Meade were to succeed or to fail. Hawkins himself wondered if history recorded “an incident more chivalric and disinterested than this.”5

In 1878 “a discussion” of Gettysburg in the Chicago Tribune prompted Robert Lincoln to write Nicolay, who had begun work with Hay on their Lincoln biography. Robert referred to his father’s pressure on Meade to pursue Lee, in which the president “allowed Meade,” if successful, to take all the “glory” and “honor” to himself. Robert remembered that his father had ordered Meade to move against Lee, but not fully trusting his own memory of such an order after fifteen years, he asked Nicolay to procure a copy. “It ought to be published right now.”6


6. Lincoln to Nicolay, June 14, 1878, box 4, Nicolay Papers; and see, for example, “The Battle of Gettysburg,” Chicago Tribune, June 9, 1878, 2:7.
Nicolay was on vacation, traveling to the Rocky Mountains, when he received Robert’s letter, but “even if I were yet in Washington” and able to search for the president’s order, “I would first most earnestly ask you to recall the request.” As Nicolay saw it, “there is to be no end to these newspaper discussions.” What is printed one day will be denied the next, it will be misdated and misquoted, and it will lack “analysis or reference.” Nicolay and Hay, who were engaged in “collecting and arranging” the “real data,” had been “amazed to find” how the true sources “sink out of sight and become fossilized” in newspapers. “I pray you to be patient,” Nicolay wrote, “and let us present these matters in authentic shape,” thus making it possible “to vindicate true history from the full record.”

Besides, however much Nicolay and Hay aspired to present the full record, they realized “new things are yet every little while turning up.” To make the point, Nicolay referred to “an important and very characteristic letter” from President Lincoln to General Joseph Hooker written the day after he assumed command. This missive is now sometimes referred to as “the Hooker letter.” Until Hooker himself had given a copy “to the officer in charge of printing the War Department records,” there had been no copy there, none among Lincoln’s own papers, and Nicolay had “no recollection of it.” According to Nicolay, Hooker took the letter as “a compliment, and such it may be; but it would be difficult to find a severer piece of friendly criticism.”

In 1881 Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story” first appeared in print. One of Robert’s “first acts” when he became the secretary of war was to contact Robert N. Scott, who was in charge of compiling the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion. Scott promptly produced “his portfolio containing all papers relating to Gettysburg and subsequent military movements up to Lee’s escape. Robert recalled, “We went through it piece by piece, finding nothing to help me out.” Without his knowledge, however, “Scott told my story” to William Conant Church, the editor of the Army and Navy Journal, whereupon it appeared, without attribution, in the August 13, 1881, issue. In that publication, Church briefly described a letter from Lincoln to Meade, urging him “to follow up his advantage without delay.” The letter said “in substance: If you succeed, all the glory and honor shall be yours; if you fail, I will take the responsibility. Mr. Lincoln added: If you succeed, destroy this letter; if you fail, keep it for your vindication.”

8. Ibid; Abraham Lincoln to Joseph Hooker, January 26, 1863, Basler, Collected Works, 6:78–79.
Church went on: “Never was a more patriotic and magnanimous letter written, and well might a son desire to preserve such a record of such a father.” Church added, “The great heart of Lincoln was shown in the fact that when the news of Lee’s escape, in spite of his letter, reached him, he bowed his head and wept tears of disappointment.” “This statement,” Church concluded, “we make upon authority that cannot be questioned”—surely a reference to Robert Lincoln himself.9

Shortly after this item was published, Captain George Meade, the general’s son, categorically dismissed it. “The magnanimity of President Lincoln is beyond question,” he wrote. “It is, therefore, especially to be regretted that upon any affirmation of it should hinge injustice to the memory of another, which he, if he were living, would be the first of men to deplore and disavow.” Captain Meade flatly denied that either his father’s papers or the records of the War Department contained any evidence of the letter in question.10

Robert Lincoln was inclined to challenge Captain Meade’s statement as soon as he read it, but Nicolay dissuaded him. “My decided advice is against writing this proposed letter, or any letter whatever on this subject, to Gen. Meade’s son.” In Nicolay’s opinion, there were “two sufficient reasons” why Robert should not take part “in historical discussions”: “you cannot consistently with your public duties tax your time and temper with them,” and “as head of the army you ought only to deal with army matters” of the present day. Following Nicolay’s advice, Secretary Lincoln apparently did not reply to a note from General Abner Doubleday, one of Meade’s critics, who wanted to quote President Lincoln’s letter to Meade in his 1882 book, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg.11

Yet Robert did not let the matter drop. In 1883, for example, he met General Herman Haupt by chance and, although “we had only three minutes conversation,” he asked him for his “recollection of the facts in regard to Meade’s inactivity after the battle of Gettysburg.” Haupt, in charge of military railroads in 1863, had repeatedly assured the president that his corps of engineers could rebuild the railroads and bridges that would make it possible for Meade to pursue Lee. Haupt later


recalled Robert’s account of entering his father’s room one day during Lee’s escape and finding him “in a condition of great depression.”

Later in 1883, Robert related his “Gettysburg story” to Isaac N. Arnold of Chicago, a Congressional supporter of the president, who wanted to include it in a new edition of his Lincoln biography. Robert was reluctant to let Arnold put the story into print. “It would at once be disputed, and I am not able to corroborate the matter in it in any way.” Although “my recollection of the incident is perfectly distinct,” there was “no copy of any communication” either among the president’s papers or in the War Department files. “I do not wonder at this,” Robert explained, “because the essence of the communication was that it was in one contingency to be absolutely secret and no record of it kept, and my father would have been sure to keep faith on that point.” Yet, Robert realized, “it would be fortunate if there was some corroborating circumstance.”

Meanwhile, Provost Marshal General James B. Fry, “urged on by his own recollections,” endeavored “to look up traces” of Lincoln’s order to Meade in the War Department files. Although Fry “remembered distinctly a message of this character,” he found nothing. Fry’s search, which he undertook “without any communication” from Robert, was probably prompted by references to the matter in the *Army and Navy Journal* in 1881.

Still eager to find evidence of the president’s order to Meade, Robert turned to his close friend Edgar T. Welles, son of Lincoln’s secretary of the navy. As Lincoln put it to Arnold, “I will say to you in confidence that I hope before long to get access to the diary of Mr. Welles.” If nothing turned up there, “I should almost begin to think that I was afflicted by at least one hallucination.”

Early in 1884, having examined the holograph Welles diary and having arranged to have parts of entries between July 7 and July 16,
1863, copied, Robert reported to Arnold that he could “find nothing to corroborate my statement of the personal pressure exerted upon Gen. Meade by my father at that time.” Robert quoted only from the entry of July 14, the day that Lee crossed the Potomac. The president had expected that this would happen, Robert wrote, for “there has seemed to him for a full week, a determination [that] Lee should escape with his force,” even though “Meade has been pressed.” Except for the “4 words I have underscored,” Robert had to admit he had “failed to find” in the Welles diary “any confirmation” of his story.16

In drafting this letter to Arnold, Robert used an undated set of extracts from the Welles diary. These extracts fill a dozen pages, and they end with an annotation in Edgar Welles’s hand: “Not to be published & for R.T.L.’s information only.” The wording does not exactly duplicate the texts of the published editions of the diary. Additional words, set in italics in the following sentences, appear at least three times in the excerpts provided for Robert Lincoln. On July 7 Welles noted the president’s belief that he “should defer to Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck on strictly military questions; ‘The country suffers in consequence.’” On July 8 Welles noted that President Lincoln was “rebuffed” whenever he pushed Meade to advance; “Alas, Alas.” And on July 14 Welles noted that to Lincoln, there seemed to be “a determination that Lee should escape; My God, exclaimed he, in agony.”17

Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story” gradually became known among readers of Civil War accounts. In 1887 the military critic J. Watts de Peyster recorded an “anecdote which has been related again and again.” On the basis of conversations with a “distinguished Major General” and “a gentleman of high position,” de Peyster wrote out a “telegram which Lincoln is said to have sent privately to Meade when he came up with Lee after Gettysburg, at Williamsport” on the Potomac River: The president “telegraphed Meade, 12th July, 1863, to attack Lee ‘peremptorily,’ cost what it might, and if he failed[,] to produce the telegram as his excuse and justification; but, if he succeeded, to destroy the telegram and take all the glory of the victory

17. See Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson, edited by Edgar T. Welles, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911); Gideon Welles, Diary, edited by Howard K. Beale, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960); and The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy, edited by William E. Gienapp and Erica L. Gienapp (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014; hereafter cited as Welles, Civil War Diary). For words not in italics, see Welles, Civil War Diary, 242, 244, 247; compare the extracts in RTL Papers, University of Illinois. Edgar Welles made his father’s diary available to Nicolay and Hay about two years after he gave Robert Lincoln an opportunity to examine it. Welles, Civil War Diary, xix.
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to himself.” De Peyster wrote to the same effect in 1901, citing generals Fry and Doubleday as his sources: “When Meade was before Lee on the Potomac, they knew that Lincoln telegraphed to Meade ‘to attack Lee, hit or miss—that if he failed, to produce this telegram in extenuation of his failure and throw the whole blame upon him, the President, and that if he were victorious to destroy the telegram and take all the glory to himself.’”18

Vice President Hannibal Hamlin and Joseph Medill, editor of the Chicago Tribune, were among the many visitors to Meade’s headquarters after Lee retreated from Gettysburg but before he recrossed the Potomac. At the time, Hamlin’s son Charles assisted A. A. Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff, while Medill’s brother, Major William Medill, Company G, Eighth Illinois Cavalry, had been wounded in the battle and would shortly die. Lacking any trace of a written order from Lincoln to Meade to pursue Lee, Gabor Boritt speculates Lincoln had deputized the vice president to communicate with Meade directly, but evidence to support this hypothesis is limited. Captain Meade, the general’s son, could not fathom why Hamlin had made the trip to Gettysburg. And only rarely during the war did Lincoln consult Hamlin or heed his patronage requests. Secretary Gideon Welles, who partly owed his position in the cabinet to Hamlin, regarded him as “rapacious” in his “demand for government favors.” On July 7, with the Gettysburg campaign preoccupying Lincoln, Hamlin had taken up his time to press for enhanced coastal defenses at Portland, in his home state of Maine.19

But Hamlin played a part in Medill’s reminiscence of Gettysburg. Wishing to see Meade at his headquarters, Medill, a “mere civilian editor,” had been “snubbed and rejected.” Undeterred, he “sought out” Hamlin and pleaded with him to contact Lincoln: “urge him, beg him, to order Meade peremptorily to pitch right in and fight it out.” Hamlin agreed with Medill, but “I don’t know whether he will pay any attention to me.” Medill recalled, however, that Hamlin did indeed telegraph Lincoln, who promptly replied: “I have received your interesting dispatch and am considering it.” Several years later, “in the course of a Gettysburg conversation,” Medill met Robert Lincoln, who had become minister to the Court of St. James, and learned that the president—prompted, in Medill’s view, by himself and Hamlin—had


sent an order to Meade that “wound up something like this: ‘If you make the attack vigorously and fail I will assume all the responsibility of the defeat. If you win you shall have all of the glory of having initiated the attack and I will never claim it.’”

In 1897 James Harlan, a former U.S. senator from Iowa and Robert Lincoln’s father-in-law, wrote Isaac N. Phillips, a reporter of decisions of the Illinois Supreme Court, regarding Lincoln’s desire that Meade attack Lee’s retreating army. Lincoln’s order, which he sent “privately” to Meade, was “accompanied by a confidential letter authorizing him to make the order public in case of disaster and in case of success to destroy both the order and confidential letter.” As Phillips put it, Lincoln’s “peremptory order” to Meade was “accompanied by perhaps the most remarkable note ever sent by a commander to his subordinate.” The wording “ran about thus: ‘This order is not of record. If you are successful you may destroy it, together with this note; if you fail, publish the order, and I will take the responsibility.’”

Robert Lincoln deflected Harlan’s suggestion that his father had sent Meade both a “peremptory order” and a “confidential letter” by asserting that there was no documentation at all. Referring in 1907 to Nicolay’s earlier insistence that there was “no record” of the matter, Robert explained, as he had to Arnold, that “the very essence of the transaction was that there should be no record, because my father requested General Meade . . . to destroy the letter in a certain contingency”—which turned on the outcome of Meade’s pursuit of Lee—“and of course he himself would not keep a copy of it.”

Finally, in 1912, Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story” was “fully thrashed out” in a cluster of ten previously unnoticed letters that he exchanged with his friend Charles Francis Adams Jr. A descendant of two presidents and a son of Lincoln’s foreign minister in London, Adams was a Union officer, a railroad executive, and a historian. When he first heard Robert Lincoln’s story of his father’s “letter to Gen. Meade” in July 1863, Adams pointed to an entry in the diary of Gideon Welles on October 16, 1863, which recorded that the president on that day had read to the cabinet a new “confidential dispatch” to

Meade. At that time, Meade appeared to be in a favorable position to engage Lee again, and so, Welles wrote, Lincoln directed Halleck to have Meade attack: “The honor will be his if he succeeds, and the blame may be mine if he fails.”

President Lincoln’s letter on October 16, 1863, had not gone unnoticed by those who doubted Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story.” As Captain Meade had written to the Army and Navy Journal in 1881, there was a “verbal similarity” between the October letter and “the supposed letter” of July 1863. Nicolay agreed: “the October letter rather excludes the probability of [Lincoln’s] having written one of the same tenor to the same man so soon before.” In light of these statements, Robert Lincoln might well have doubted his own story. He wrote Adams, “It is of course difficult to believe that my father would write the October letter after the complete failure of the one he told me of.” But yet, “as I told you, my vivid recollection is of the incident in July, in my summer vacation.” Realizing that he seemed to lack corroboration for his story, Robert suggested that it was supported by a letter he received from Haupt, who wrote that he had assured Lincoln that Lee could be caught if the railroads and bridges between the two armies were promptly rebuilt. Robert, on a short vacation from Harvard, also recalled his father’s message to Meade in October, for he “read it to me before he sent it.”

Casting aside his initial reluctance to accept Robert’s story, Adams wrote him again: “I have come very distinctly to the conclusion that your father did indeed write two letters, more or less of the same character, to Gen. Meade. . . . I am confident your recollection is correct.” In October 1863 Lincoln had simply “renewed his pressure on Meade.” At that time, however, “he sent him something in the nature of a ‘dispatch,’ which he communicated to his Cabinet.” As Adams saw it, Lincoln had also ordered Meade forward in July, doing so “in the form” Robert had said. But, by the time Meade received Lincoln’s order to attack, “the opportunity had escaped him, and he was wholly justified in declining to act, even under the conditions as to responsibility” set forth by the president.

23. Charles F. Adams to Robert Lincoln, April 2, 1912, RTL Papers, University of Illinois; Welles, Civil War Diary, 310; Abraham Lincoln to Henry W. Halleck, October 16, 1863, Basler, Collected Works, 6:518–19.
24. Army and Navy Journal, August 27, 1881; Nicolay to Robert Lincoln, September 5, 1881, Nicolay Papers; Robert Lincoln to Adams, April 8, 1912, Papers of Charles Francis Adams II, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (hereafter Adams Papers); Haupt to Robert Lincoln, March 28, 1889, RTL Papers, University of Illinois; Emerson, Giant in the Shadows, 278.
25. Adams to Robert Lincoln, July 9, 12, 1863, RTL Papers, University of Illinois.
Much of the correspondence between Adams and Lincoln concerned the strengths and weaknesses of Meade and Lee after the Battle of Gettysburg. For Adams the subject was of “sufficient interest to justify my loquacity.” In reply Lincoln hoped that he too would not become “too prolix.” In the end, however, both concluded that Meade had solid reasons for not pursuing Lee. Indeed, Robert wrote that he had finally “come to the belief that it was better for the whole situation that Lee’s army was not destroyed at the time.” He added: “It is at least a question” whether it was not better “that the spirit of arrogance and rebellion that inspired that generation of the South, should receive the dreadful lesson given to it by the destruction of the campaigns East and West of 1864 and the Spring of 1865.”26

Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story” was very much on his mind over the years. During his discussions with Adams in 1912, for instance, he talked about it with Herbert Putnam, head of the Library of Congress; he corresponded about it with Major General James H. Wilson, author of Under the Old Flag (1912); and he suggested Colonel Henry S. Huidekoper, major general of the Pennsylvania National Guard, could also corroborate his recollection.27

Yet, in his characteristic way, Robert took pains not to broadcast the story. As he wrote Byron Andrews, editor of the National Tribune, “I was in Washington City” on occasion during the war, and “of course” I remember a number of incidents which I sometimes tell on occasion, in private conversation.” But “there is nothing that I would care to publish.” Robert even equivocated in a letter to Helen Nicolay, perhaps because her father had questioned his “Gettysburg story.” As he wrote after reading her manuscript, Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln (1912), “I am sorry that I cannot at all remember the Gettysburg incident but it is of course true. It was just in line with my father’s feelings at the time.”28

In 1918 Robert Lincoln drew back when he heard that Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the Century Magazine, had described some things he had reportedly heard from Robert as “stupendous.” “I probably told him of some conversations with my father, particularly one relating to the Battle of Gettysburg.” In that case, Robert wrote, “there is no

26. Adams to Robert Lincoln, April 12, 1912, RTL Papers, University of Illinois; Robert Lincoln to Adams, April 22, 1922, Adams Papers (emphasis added).
27. Adams to Robert Lincoln, April 12, 1912, RTL Papers, University of Illinois; Wilson to Robert Lincoln, April 12, 1912, and Robert Lincoln to Adams, April 10, 1912, Adams Papers.
28. Robert Lincoln to Andrews, April 21, 1900, Lincoln Letterpress Volumes; Robert Lincoln to Helen Nicolay, May 29, 1912, box 6, Nicolay Papers.
existing evidence except my memory.” He then added, “I shall most certainly not, by any further publication of my own, venture to raise a discussion which could have no good result and would be a great bore to me.”

Yet Robert continued to cherish his “Gettysburg story,” sharing it with friends, although never with the press. Twice before he died in 1926, he told his story to George H. Thacher, an Albany banker with whom he played golf, and Thacher recorded what he said: “Entering my father’s room right after the Battle of Gettysburg, I found him in tears, with head bowed upon his arms” at his table. Asked by Robert what was the matter, Lincoln explained the situation. Assured by Haupt that the bridge at Williamsport could be rapidly rebuilt, “I at once wrote Meade to attack without delay, and if successful to destroy my letter, but in case of failure to preserve it for his vindication.” But, the president said, “I have just learned” that Meade and his generals had “determined not to pursue Lee, and now the opportunity of ending this bitter struggle is lost.” Such are “the facts in the case,” Robert concluded, “Nicolay and Hay, and all others, to the contrary notwithstanding.”

But what is to be made of the fact that the wording of Lincoln’s order to Meade, as told by Robert to Thacher, is clearly not identical to the wording as variously reported by others over the previous fifty-odd years? It seems probable that Robert did indeed witness his father breaking down in tears when learning of Lee’s escape. Nothing that is known of the younger Lincoln would suggest that he might have fabricated a scene of this kind. It seems necessary, however, to consider the nature of the presidential order that Lincoln is said to have sent to Meade. If sent at all, was it written or only communicated verbally? When was it sent? And did Meade receive it? There are simply no conclusive answers to these questions.

It was General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck, not Lincoln himself, who communicated Lincoln’s direction that Meade take the offensive against Lee before he could cross the Potomac. Day by day, for a full week, Halleck’s dispatches became more insistent that Meade act.


On July 8, for instance, Halleck telegraphed Meade: “The President is urgent and anxious that your army should move against [Lee] by forced marches.” On July 12 Meade brought his corps commanders together. Despite Meade’s decision by that point to engage Lee, most of his generals advised against it. Two days later word came that Lee had crossed the Potomac.31

Lincoln was distraught—and his son witnessed the intensity of his distress. “There is bad faith somewhere,” the anguished president declared. In retrospect, however, it seems apparent Lincoln exaggerated the passivity of Meade and his generals, and minimized the dangers of a wholesale assault. There was hardly such a command failure as to justify the Congressional inquiry into Meade’s generalship the following spring. Nor is there evidence that Meade’s generals were infected by copperheadism or wished, for their own benefit, to prolong the war.32

But the basic authenticity of Robert Lincoln’s “Gettysburg story” does not turn on assessments of the military situation in the aftermath of that battle. Although, as Robert said, “I have told” the story “probably a dozen times,” he had “always been careful to say it is disputed, and that it rests on my memory alone, so far as I have yet been able to discover.” It was not Robert Lincoln but his listeners who rendered the president’s “order” into words. That such an order came directly from Lincoln rather than through the general-in-chief was somewhat unusual. Moreover, it was shaped in a singular way—Lincoln being at once ready to take the blame if an attack failed and ready to give Meade all the credit if he succeeded. Observers have seen it, so formulated, in contrasting ways. From a cynical perspective, Lincoln’s way of urging General Meade forward was not only the work of “a crafty civilian” but also “insulting” to a military leader of proven competence. From a more generous perspective, however, there was a certain “magnanimity” in Lincoln’s order. Convinced after the Battle of Gettysburg that Lee’s army could indeed be broken up, Lincoln, in a self-effacing way, gave Meade every incentive to attack. He was thus naturally disheartened when Lee got away.33

32. Welles, Civil War Diary, 247; Bruce Tap, Over Lincoln’s Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998) 172–87; compare Boritt, Lincoln’s Generals, 98–99.