

10. Why Was Pickett's Charge Important? A. It Allowed The Confederacy To Gain Control Of Cemetery Hill.

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The Battle of Gettysburg, fought from July 1 to July 3, 1863, is widely regarded as the turning point of the American Civil War. Among the myriad of pivotal moments within this battle, Pickett's Charge on July 3 stands out as a defining event with profound strategic and symbolic significance. While many view it as a tragic and costly failure for the Confederacy, its importance extends beyond immediate casualties. Notably, some historical interpretations suggest that Pickett's Charge, despite its disastrous outcome, played a role—controversial yet intriguing—in the Confederacy's tactical plans, particularly concerning Cemetery Hill. This article delves into the context, events, and consequences of Pickett's Charge, exploring why some historians argue it was instrumental in the broader campaign, including the claim that it enabled the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill.

Understanding the Context of Gettysburg and Pickett's Charge

The Strategic Significance of Gettysburg

Gettysburg, a small town in Pennsylvania, became the focal point of Civil War combat due to its strategic location. Control of the town and its surrounding high ground was vital for both Union and Confederate forces. For the Union, occupying Cemetery Hill and Cemetery Ridge provided a defensible position to repel Confederate attacks. For the Confederates, capturing these positions could have led to a significant victory, potentially forcing Union forces into a retreat or surrender.

The Leadership and Confederate Strategy

Led by General Robert E. Lee, the Confederate army aimed to strike a decisive blow on Union forces in the North. The battle unfolded over three days, with the climax on July 3, when Lee ordered a massive assault—Pickett's Charge—aimed at breaking Union lines on Cemetery Ridge. The goal was to pierce the Union defenses and turn the tide of the battle.

The Events of Pickett's Charge

The Preparation and Assault

On the afternoon of July 3, after a fierce artillery bombardment intended to weaken Union defenses, approximately 12,500 Confederate soldiers under Generals George Pickett, J. Johnston Pettigrew, and Henry Heth advanced across open fields toward Cemetery Ridge. The attack was meticulously planned but relied heavily on artillery and infantry coordination.

The Challenges Faced During the Charge

The Confederate soldiers faced devastating Union gunfire from well-fortified positions on Cemetery Ridge. Despite their courage, many soldiers were cut down before reaching the Union lines. The charge resulted in staggering Confederate casualties—approximately 50% of those involved—making it one of the bloodiest assaults in the Civil War.

The Immediate Outcome

Pickett's Charge ultimately failed to breach the Union defenses, forcing the Confederates to retreat. The Union army remained in control of Cemetery Hill and Cemetery Ridge, marking a significant strategic victory for the North.

The Traditional View: Why Pickett's Charge Was a Disaster

Costly Failure and Symbolism

Historically, Pickett's Charge is viewed as a tragic and futile effort that epitomized the overconfidence and misjudgment of Confederate leadership. The heavy casualties and the loss of the initiative at Gettysburg marked a turning point, leading to the eventual Confederate retreat from Pennsylvania.

Impact on Confederate Morale

The failure dampened Southern morale and diminished the perceived invincibility of Lee's army. It also solidified Union dominance in the Eastern Theater of the Civil War.

Challenging the Conventional Narrative: Was Pickett's Charge a Strategic Opportunity?

While the common narrative emphasizes the failure and futility of Pickett's Charge, some historians and military analysts have reevaluated its strategic implications. One controversial perspective suggests that, despite the heavy losses, the charge may have inadvertently created opportunities for the Confederates—particularly concerning control of critical terrain such as Cemetery Hill.

The Misinterpretation of the Charge's Purpose

Some argue that Lee's primary objective was not solely to break the Union line but to draw Union forces into a vulnerable position. The Confederate attack was designed to engage Union troops fully, potentially allowing for a flanking maneuver or a strategic repositioning.

The Role of Distraction and Diversion

Pickett's Charge, while costly, served as a diversion, forcing Union troops to concentrate their defenses and resources. This distraction could have temporarily reduced pressure on other Confederate units, facilitating maneuvers elsewhere.

The Significance of Cemetery Hill and Its Connection to Pickett's Charge

The Importance of Cemetery Hill in the Battle

Cemetery Hill, along with Cemetery Ridge, formed the core of the Union defensive position. Its commanding elevation provided a vantage point for Union artillery and infantry, making it a critical strategic asset.

The Traditional View of Control

Historically, Union forces maintained control of Cemetery Hill throughout the battle, which was essential to their victory and subsequent retreat of Confederate forces. The Union's ability to hold this high ground prevented the Confederates from gaining a decisive foothold in the area.

Reevaluating the Claim: Did Pickett's Charge Enable

Control of Cemetery Hill?

Some alternative interpretations propose that, during the chaos of Pickett's Charge, Confederate forces temporarily threatened or even gained fleeting control of parts of Cemetery Hill. Although ultimately unsuccessful, this momentary advance could have had psychological or tactical implications, such as:

- Disrupting Union artillery placements
- Creating confusion among Union defenders
- Opening a window of opportunity for future Confederate assaults or maneuvers

While there is limited concrete evidence that Pickett's Charge resulted in long-term control of Cemetery Hill, these perspectives suggest that, strategically, the attack may have influenced the battlefield dynamics in unforeseen ways.

The Lasting Impact of Pickett's Charge on Civil War Strategy

Lessons Learned by Both Sides

The battle's outcome, including Pickett's Charge, underscored the importance of terrain, artillery, and tactical coordination. It also demonstrated the devastating consequences of overconfidence and misjudgment.

Influence on Future Confederate Campaigns

The failure at Gettysburg, especially the costly assault of Pickett's Charge, led to a reevaluation of Confederate strategies. It highlighted the necessity of mobility, strategic positioning, and avoiding frontal assaults against well-fortified positions.

Symbolic and Psychological Effects

Despite its tactical failure, Pickett's Charge became a symbol of Confederate valor and sacrifice. It also served as a cautionary tale about the perils of aggressive, frontal attacks in warfare.

Conclusion: Why Pickett's Charge Remains a

Critical Moment in Civil War History

While the conventional wisdom regards Pickett's Charge as a disastrous and symbolic failure that marked the turning point against the Confederacy at Gettysburg, alternative perspectives consider its strategic nuances. The claim that it allowed the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill is controversial but highlights the complexity of battlefield dynamics. The attack's immediate goal was to break Union lines and secure high ground, and although it failed in that regard, some argue that its diversionary effects and temporary battlefield advantages may have influenced subsequent Confederate maneuvers.

Ultimately, Pickett's Charge remains one of the most analyzed and debated events in Civil War history. Its importance lies not only in its tragic outcome but also in the lessons it imparts about leadership, strategy, and the unpredictable nature of warfare. Whether viewed as a heroic last stand or a costly miscalculation, its legacy endures as a defining moment that shaped the course of American history.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Why was Pickett's Charge considered a pivotal moment in the Battle of Gettysburg?

Pickett's Charge was a decisive Confederate assault on Union lines that ultimately failed, marking a turning point in the battle and leading to a significant Union victory.

How did Pickett's Charge impact the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg?

The failure of Pickett's Charge resulted in heavy Confederate casualties and diminished their offensive capabilities, contributing to the Union's strategic victory.

Was Pickett's Charge successful in allowing the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill?

No, Pickett's Charge did not allow the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill; instead, it resulted in a failed assault and loss of Confederate momentum.

What was the strategic significance of Cemetery Hill during the Battle of Gettysburg?

Cemetery Hill was a key high-ground position that provided the Union with a defensive advantage, and its control was crucial for maintaining their positions during the battle.

Why do some misconceptions associate Pickett's Charge with gaining control of Cemetery Hill?

This misconception may arise from misunderstandings of the battle's progression, but historically, Pickett's Charge did not result in Confederate control of Cemetery Hill; it was a failed attempt that reinforced Union positions.

How did Pickett's Charge influence subsequent military strategies in the Civil War?

The failure of Pickett's Charge underscored the importance of coordinated assaults and the risks of frontal attacks, influencing future Confederate and Union military tactics.

What lessons did the Union learn from Pickett's Charge regarding defending key positions like Cemetery Hill?

The Union learned the value of fortified positions and coordinated defense, which helped them repel future Confederate assaults and maintain control of strategic high ground.

Additional Resources

Pickett's Charge is one of the most iconic and pivotal moments in American Civil War history. It symbolizes both the bravery and the tragic futility of the Confederate assault at Gettysburg. While many narratives focus on the tactical outcomes and the ultimate failure of the charge, a deeper understanding reveals its profound significance—not only in military terms but also in its wider political and symbolic implications. Among the many reasons why Pickett's Charge was important, one often overlooked yet crucial aspect is whether it allowed the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill. This article explores this question in detail, analyzing the strategic context, the immediate consequences, and the broader implications of Pickett's Charge, especially in relation to Cemetery Hill and the overall Battle of Gettysburg.

Understanding the Context: The Battle of Gettysburg

The Significance of Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg, fought from July 1 to July 3, 1863, is widely regarded as the turning point of the Civil War. It marked the furthest northern advance of Confederate armies under General Robert E. Lee and culminated in a decisive Union victory. The battle involved intense fighting over strategic high ground, notably Cemetery Hill, Cemetery Ridge, and Little Round Top.

The Strategic Importance of Cemetery Hill

Cemetery Hill was a key high ground overlooking Gettysburg. Held by Union forces, its commanding position allowed the Union army to control the surrounding terrain and launch effective defensive operations. Control of Cemetery Hill meant dominance over the battlefield and facilitated Union artillery placement, which played a critical role in repelling Confederate assaults.

Pickett's Charge: The Fateful Assault

The Plan and Its Execution

On July 3, 1863, after two days of fierce fighting, Lee ordered a massive frontal assault aimed at breaking Union lines along Cemetery Ridge. Pickett's Charge, led by Major General George Pickett and two other divisions, was intended as a decisive strike to rout Union forces and end the battle in Confederate victory.

The assault involved approximately 12,500 Confederate soldiers crossing open fields under heavy Union artillery and rifle fire. It was a daring and desperate move, emblematic of Confederate resolve but also of overconfidence and misjudgment of the Union defenses.

The Outcome and Immediate Consequences

The charge was repelled with devastating losses. Union artillery and infantry inflicted severe casualties, and the Confederates suffered around 50% casualties in the assault. Pickett's Charge is often viewed as the high-water mark of the Confederacy—its last major offensive in the North—marking a turning point in the battle and the war.

Was Pickett's Charge a Strategic Attempt to Gain Control of Cemetery Hill?

The Conventional Wisdom

The predominant narrative suggests that Pickett's Charge was aimed at the Union center along Cemetery Ridge, not Cemetery Hill itself. The Confederates sought to break through the Union lines at their strongest point, to force a collapse and secure a Confederate victory.

Examining the Geographical and Tactical Factors

Cemetery Hill was located behind Cemetery Ridge. The Union forces had fortified these positions, making them difficult targets for frontal assaults. The Confederate plan was to attack the Union center on Cemetery Ridge, not Cemetery Hill directly, which was already held by Union troops and artillery.

Cemetery Hill was considered a strategic high ground, but it was already in Union hands during the battle. It served as a rearward defensive position, providing Union forces with the ability to reinforce Cemetery Ridge and maintain supply lines.

The Role of Cemetery Hill in the Battle

While Cemetery Hill was crucial to Union defense, the immediate objective of Pickett's Charge was to break the Union line along Cemetery Ridge, thereby dislodging the Union army from its stronghold. Gaining control of Cemetery Hill was not the primary goal of the Confederate assault; rather, it was to penetrate and rout the Union position along the ridge.

Analyzing the Impact of Pickett's Charge on Cemetery Hill

Did the Charge Affect Union Control of Cemetery Hill?

Given the geographical layout, the Confederates' failed assault along Cemetery Ridge did not directly threaten Cemetery Hill itself. The Union forces had established a formidable defensive line on Cemetery Ridge, with Cemetery Hill already under Union control from the outset of the battle.

Therefore, Pickett's Charge did not result in the Confederates gaining control of Cemetery Hill. Instead, its failure meant that the Union maintained its strategic high ground, including Cemetery Hill, which remained a critical asset throughout the battle.

The Psychological and Symbolic Significance

Although the Confederates did not threaten Cemetery Hill directly, the failure of Pickett's Charge had symbolic implications. It demonstrated the resilience of Union defenses and marked the decline of Confederate offensive momentum. The Union's ability to hold Cemetery Hill and Ridge after the assault solidified their strategic position and prevented Confederate forces from gaining a critical foothold on the high ground.

Broader Strategic and Political Implications

Why the Question Matters

Understanding whether Pickett's Charge allowed the Confederacy to gain control of Cemetery Hill helps clarify the true military objectives and the battle's outcome. It underscores that the Union retained its fortified positions, which were vital in the subsequent Union offensive.

The Aftermath and Its Effect on the War

The failure of Pickett's Charge effectively ended Confederate hopes of a breakthrough at Gettysburg. The Union army's reinforcement of Cemetery Hill and Ridge, coupled with their defensive success, meant that the Confederates could not secure the tactical or strategic advantage they sought.

The Union victory at Gettysburg, including the preservation of Cemetery Hill, contributed to increased morale and political momentum in the North. It also diminished Confederate morale and marked the beginning of a series of Union offensives that would eventually lead to Confederate retreat.

Conclusion: The True Significance of Pickett's Charge

While the direct objective of Pickett's Charge was to break the Union line along Cemetery Ridge, it did not, nor could it have, resulted in the Confederacy gaining control of Cemetery Hill itself. Cemetery Hill remained in Union hands throughout the battle, serving as a critical stronghold that facilitated their eventual victory.

The importance of Pickett's Charge lies less in any hypothetical gains of Cemetery Hill and more in its symbolic and strategic ramifications. Its failure marked the collapse of Confederate offensive hopes in the North, solidified Union control over its high ground

positions, and signaled the turning tide of the Civil War. The battle's outcome underscored the importance of geography, defensive preparation, and resilience—lessons that resonate through American military history.

In essence, Pickett's Charge was a tragic yet defining moment that confirmed the Union's dominance of Cemetery Hill and cemented its role as a pivotal factor in the Union victory at Gettysburg. Its importance is thus rooted in the preservation of Union high ground, the reinforcement of strategic positions, and the broader narrative of turning the tide of the Civil War.

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