"If At All Practicable"

July 1, 1863, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

These four words almost certainly changed the course of American History. Had they not been uttered, or had they been understood differently, we may not be celebrating the 4th of July as Independence Day.   On this first day of July, 1863, two armies met just outside the Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg, less than a day's ride on horseback from the Union capital, Washington, D.C. What occurred over the course of the next three days would be the bloodiest, deadliest battle in American history and by most historians' accounts, the first paragraph in the epitaph of the Confederate States of America.

Fresh from a resounding victory at Chancellorsville, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was battle-hardened, seasoned, in abundant possession of espirit de corps, and of the firm, fixed opinion that it was nearly invulnerable. Seeking to ultimately threaten the Union capital of Washington, General Lee ventured into Union territory with the aim of out maneuvering the Union Army of the Potomac (in general Union armies were named after waterways, while Confederate armies were named after territories) under the newly assumed command of General Gordon Meade. It was by happenstance that the two armies "bumped" into each other just northwest of the town of Gettysburg.

Riding forward, always toward the sound of battle on that first day, Lee viewed the unfolding fight from a vantage point that allowed him to appreciate the entirety of the battlefield. Most significantly, he identified what in military terminology would be called the "key terrain." He knew instinctively (Lee spent most of his career as a civil engineer) that "Culp's Hill" on the western edge of the town was just such key terrain. He knew that if his forces could occupy that hill, they could command the battlefield from it and dominate the Union forces as they emerged from the east and south. Wanting to move hastily, Lee told his aide to take a message to his corps commander, General Richard (Dick) Ewell: "Tell general Ewell to take the hill *if at all practicable*."

In his haste, Lee had forgotten one of the most valuable lessons for any leader: *KNOW YOUR PEOPLE*. You see, Ewell was a new commander; Lee hadn't worked with him as a corps commander previously. General Ewell was elevated to the lofty status of corps commander after the battle of Chancellorsville, where Lee's most trusted and valued commander, Stonewall Jackson, had been accidentally shot and killed. In essence, Lee forgot he wasn't communicating with Jackson--with whom he was of one mind. Jackson and Lee were so in tune with each other, so like-minded, that when Jackson died, Lee said, "I am bleeding at the heart. I have lost my right arm." For Lee, an order to "take the hill if at all practicable," made perfect sense--at least when it came to Jackson who was known as one of the fiercest warriors in either army. Jackson would have either taken the hill or died trying to take it. Ewell, on the other hand, believed he had options upon receiving Lee's order: Take the hill if you think you can take it. If not, then don't.

Ewell's corps advance toward the hill was half-hearted and Culp's Hill was ultimately seized and controlled by Meade's army, allowing it to form a solid, impenetrable defense that it could quickly reinforce regardless of the direction of Lee's attacks.

The consensus of Civil War historians is that the Battle of Gettysburg marked the "high water mark" for the Army of Northern Virginia and the Confederacy. Lee's army would never invade Union territory again and was never able to pose a real threat to Washington. We can only speculate as to what may have been the outcome of the battle and moreover the war itself had Lee known better than to issue such a vague order to a follower about whom he understood and knew little.   Uttering four words may have changed the course of history.

Can leaders today afford to be anything but certain when they attempt to communicate that their messages are being understood?