

***THEODORE
AYRAULT DODGE***



***THE CAMPAIGN
OF CHANCELLORSVILLE***

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Theodore Ayrault Dodge

The Campaign of Chancellorsville

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I. INTRODUCTION.

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It must seem to the casual reader of the history of the war of 1861–65, that enough has already been written upon the campaign of Chancellorsville. And there are numerous brilliant essays, in the histories now before the public, which give a coup-d'oeil more or less accurate of this ten-days' passage of arms. But none of these spread before the reader facts sufficiently detailed to illustrate the particular theory advanced by each to account for the defeat of the Army of the Potomac on this field.

The stigma besmirching the character of the Eleventh Corps, and of Howard, its then commanding general, for a panic and rout in but a small degree owing to them; the unjust strictures passed upon Sedgwick for his failure to execute a practically impossible order; the truly remarkable blunders into which Gen. Hooker allowed himself to lapse, in endeavoring to explain away his responsibility for the disaster; the bare fact, indeed, that the Army of the Potomac was here beaten by Lee, with one-half its force; and the very partial publication, thus far, of the details of the campaign, and the causes of our defeat—may stand as excuse for one more attempt to make plain its operations to the survivors of the one hundred and eighty thousand men who there bore arms, and to the few who harbor some interest in the subject as mere history.

To say that Gen. Hooker lapsed into blunders in explaining his share in this defeat, is to use a form of words purposely tempered to the memory of a gallant soldier, who, whatever his shortcomings, has done his country signal service; and to avoid the imputation of baldly throwing down the gauntlet of ungracious criticism. All reference to Gen.

Hooker's skill or conduct in this, one of the best conceived and most fatally mismanaged of the many unsuccessful advances of the Army of the Potomac, is made with sincere appreciation of his many admirable qualities, frankly, and untinged by bitterness. But it must be remembered, that Gen. Hooker has left himself on record as the author of many harsh reflections upon his subordinates; and that to mete out even justice to all requires unvarnished truth.

The most uncalled-for slur upon the conduct of his lieutenants probably occurs in his testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War. Before withdrawing from the south side of the Rappahannock, after the decisive events of the battle-field had cooped up the army between the river and its intrenchments, Hooker called together all his corps commanders, and requested their several opinions as to the advisability of attack or retreat. Whatever discussion may have then been had, it was generally understood, in after-days, that all but one of these generals had expressed himself freely for an immediate advance. In referring to this understanding, while denying its correctness, Hooker used the following language:—

"So far as my experience extends, there are in all armies officers more valiant after the fight than while it is pending; and, when a truthful history of the Rebellion shall be written, it will be found that the Army of the Potomac is not an exception."

Merely to characterize as ungenerous this aspersion upon the courage of such men as then served under Hooker, savors of error on the side of leniency. And, inasmuch as these words strike, as it were, the keynote of all the statements which Hooker has vouchsafed with reference to these events, they might be assumed fairly to open the door to unsparing criticism. But it is hoped that this course has been avoided; and that what censure is dealt out to Gen. Hooker in the succeeding pages will be accepted, even by

his advocates, in the kindly spirit in which it is meant, and in which every soldier of the beloved old Army of the Potomac must uniformly refer to every other.

There is, moreover, no work on Chancellorsville which results from research into all records now accessible.

The work of Allan and Hotchkiss, of 1867, than which nothing can be more even-handed, or more admirable as far as it goes, adopts generally the statements made in the reports of the Confederate generals: and these are necessarily one-sided; reports of general officers concerning their own operations invariably are. Allan and Hotchkiss wrote with only the Richmond records before them, in addition to such information from the Federal standpoint as may be found in general orders, the evidence given before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, and newspaper correspondence. At that time many of the Federal reports were not to be had: such as were at the War Department were hardly accessible. Reports had been duly made by all superior officers engaged in and surviving this campaign, excepting only the general in command; but, strange to say, not only did Gen. Hooker refrain from making a report, but he retained in his personal possession many of the records of the Army of the Potomac covering the period of his command, and it is only since his death that these records have been in part recovered by the Secretary of War. Some are still missing, but they probably contain no important matter not fully given elsewhere.

Although Hooker testified before the Committee on the Conduct of the War: "Without an exception I forwarded to that office"—the War Department—"all the reports and returns and information concerning the army, and furnished them promptly, and, as I think, as no other army commander has done," his memory had at the moment played him traitor, for a considerable part of these records were not disposed of as stated. It should be remarked,

however, that Hooker is not singular in this leaning towards the meum in the matter of records.

The sources relied on for the facts herein given are the reports of the officers engaged, both Federal and Confederate, added to many private notes, memoranda, and maps, made by them; the testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, which included Hooker's examination; and the maps made by the Engineer Department of the United-States Army, and those of Capt. Hotchkiss.

This latter officer was the topographical engineer of the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, and made his surveys by order of Gen. Lee immediately after the campaign. They are of the greatest assistance and value.

Eighteen years have elapsed since North and South crossed swords upon this memorable field; and it would seem that all Americans can now contemplate with unruffled heart the errors under which "the Army of the Potomac was here beaten without ever being fought," as well as boast with equal pride, not only of the abundant courage displayed by either side, but of the calm skill with which Gen. Lee wrested victory from a situation desperately compromised, and of the genius of that greatest of his lieutenants, Thomas J. Jackson, who here sealed with his blood his fidelity to the cause he loved so well.

It has been said that this campaign furnishes as much material for the psychological as for the military student. And certainly nothing less than a careful analysis of Hooker's character can explain the abnormal condition into which his mental and physical energy sank during the second act of this drama. He began with really masterly moves, speedily placing his wary adversary at the saddest disadvantage. But, having attained this height, his power seemed to pass away as from an over-tasked mind. With twice the weight of arm, and as keen a blade, he appeared

quite unable to parry a single lunge of Lee's, quite unable to thrust himself. He allowed his corps commanders to be beaten in detail, with no apparent effort to aid them from his abundant resources, the while his opponent was demanding from every man in his command the last ounce of his strength. And he finally retired, dazed and weary, across the river he had so ably and boastingly placed behind him ten days before, against the opinion of nearly all his subordinates; for in this case the conditions were so plain that even an informal council of war advised a fight.

With character-study, however, this sketch has nothing to do. It is confined to describing events, and suggesting queries for the curious in military history.

II. CONDITION OF THE COMBATANTS.

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The first two years of civil strife had closed. The American people, which so far had shown more aptness at learning than skill in waging war, may be said to have passed through its apprenticeship in arms. The broad plan of operations, intelligently but rudely conceived at the outset by the greater spirits among our commanders, began to be more clearly grasped. The political strategy of both contestants made Virginia the field on which the left wing of the Federal armies pivoted, while the right swung farther and farther south and east, and the Confederates gallantly struggled for every foot of territory, yielding only to the inexorable. This right wing had already possession of the Mississippi as far south as Vicksburg, around which place Grant was preparing to tighten his coils; it had occupied the line of the Tennessee River, and had rendered useless to the Confederates the railroad from Memphis to Chattanooga, which had been the great central artery between Richmond and the trans-Mississippi States. The Southern partisans, with Morgan and Forrest as typical chiefs, had up to this period played, in the West especially, a very important part. They as much exceeded our cavalry in enterprise as they had advantage over it in knowledge of the country and in assistance from its population. They had on more than one occasion tapped the too long and slender lines of operation of our foremost armies. They had sent Grant to the right-about from his first march on Vicksburg, thus neutralizing Sherman's attempt at Chickasaw Bayou. They had compelled Buell to forfeit his hardly-earned footing, and to fall back from the Tennessee River to Louisville at the double-quick in order to beat Bragg in the race towards the

gate of the Northern States, which disaster was happily soon retrieved by the latter's bloody check before Murfreesborough. Yet, despite these back-sets, the general course of events showed that Providence remained on the side of the heaviest battalions; and the spring of 1863 saw our armies extended from the pivot midway between the rival capitals in a more or less irregular line, and interrupted by the Alleghany Mountains, to Vicksburg and the Father of Waters.

Great as was the importance of success in Virginia, the Confederates had appreciated the fact as had not the political soldiers at the head of the Federal department of war. Our resources always enabled us to keep more men, and more and better material, on this battle-ground, than the Confederates could do; but this strength was constantly offset by the ability of the Southern generals, and their independence of action, as opposed to the frequent unskilfulness of ours, who were not only never long in command, but were then tied hand and foot to some ideal plan for insuring the safety of Washington. The political conditions under which the Army of the Potomac had so far constantly acted had never allowed it to do justice to its numbers, mobility, or courage; while Mr. Lincoln, who actually assumed the powers of commander-in-chief, technically intrusted to him by the Constitution, was swayed to and fro by his own fears for the safety of his capital, and by political schemes and military obtuseness at his elbow.

Whether the tedious delays and deferred success, occasioned by these circumstances, were not eventually a benefit, in that they enabled the country to bring forth in the fulness of time the conditions leading to the extinguishment of slavery, which an earlier close of the war might not have seen; not to mention the better appreciation by either combatant of the value of the other, which a struggle to the bitter end alone could generate—is a

question for the political student. But it will always remain in doubt whether the practical exhaustion of the resources of the South was not a condition precedent to ending the war—whether, in sooth, the "last ditch" was not actually reached when Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

In the West, merit had by this time brought to the surface the generals who later led us to successful victories. Their distance from the central controlling power resulted in their being let alone to work out their own salvation. Opposed to them had been some excellent but not the best of the Confederate leaders; while Virginia boasted the elite of the Southern troops, the strongest of the captains, and the most daring of the lieutenants, developed by the war.

Since the Russian campaign of Bonaparte, no such vast forces had been under arms. To command these required not only the divine military spark, but hardly-acquired experience. And the mimic war which the elements of European army life always affords had been wanting to educate our generals. It is not wonderful, then, that two years of fruitless campaigning was needed to teach our leaders how to utilize on such difficult terrain material equally vast in extent and uncouth in quality. For, however apt the American to learn the trade of war—or any other—it is a moot-point whether his independence of character is compatible with the perfect soldier, as typified in Friedrich's regiments, or the Old Guard.

But ability, native or acquired, forced its way to the front; and the requisite experience was gradually gained, for the school was one where the trade was quickly taught. Said Gen. Meade on one occasion, "The art of war must be acquired like any other. Either an officer must learn it at the academy, or he must learn it by experience in the field. Provided he has learned it, I don't care whether he is a West-Pointer, or not."

In the East, then, the army had been led by McDowell, McClellan, Pope, and Burnside, to victory and defeat equally fruitless. The one experiment so far tried, of giving the Army of the Potomac a leader from the West, culminating in the disaster of the second Bull Run, was not apt to be repeated within the year. That soldier of equal merit and modesty, whom the Army of the Potomac had been gradually educating as its future and permanent leader, was still unpretentiously commanding a corps, and learning by the successes and failures of his superiors. And who shall say that the results accomplished by Grant, Sherman, Thomas, Sheridan, and Meade, were not largely due to their good fortune in not being too early thrust to the front? "For," as says Swinton, "it was inevitable that the first leaders should be sacrificed to the nation's ignorance of war."

In the South, the signs of exhaustion had not yet become grave. The conscription act, passed in April, 1862, had kept the ranks full. The hope of foreign intervention, though distant, was by no means wholly abandoned. Financial matters had not yet assumed an entirely desperate complexion. Nor had the belief in the royalty of cotton received its coup de grace. The vigor and courage of the Confederacy were unabated, and the unity of parties in the one object of resistance to invasion doubled its effective strength. Perhaps this moment was the flood-tide of Southern enthusiasm and confidence; which, after the Pennsylvania campaign, began to ebb. It is not intended to convey the idea that the South was prosperous. On the contrary, those who read the signs aright, saw and predicted its approaching decline. But, as far as its power of resistance went, it was at its highest when compared with the momentarily lessened aggressiveness of the North. For the anti-war party was doing its best to tie the hands of the administration; and, while this in no wise lessened the flow of men and material to the front, it produced a grave effect

upon the moral strength which our chiefs were able to
infuse into their method of conducting the war.

III. HOOKER AND THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC.

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The unfortunate course of events during the early winter of 1862-63 had resulted in a grievous loss of morale in the Army of the Potomac. The useless slaughter of Marye's Heights was, after a few weeks, succeeded by that most huge of all strategic jokes, the Mud March; and Gen. Burnside retired from a position he had never sought, to the satisfaction, and, be it said to his credit, with the warm personal regard, of all. Sumner, whom the weight of years had robbed of strength, but not of gallantry, was relieved at his own request; Franklin was shelved. Hooker thus became senior general officer, and succeeded to the command.

No man enjoyed a more enviable reputation in the Army of the Potomac. He had forced himself upon its notice. From Bull Run, after which action he is said to have remarked to Mr. Lincoln that he knew more than any one on that field; through Williamsburg, where he so gallantly held his own against odds during the entire day, and with exhausted ammunition, until relieved by Kearney; before Richmond; during the Seven Days; in the railroad-cutting at Manassas; at Antietam, where he forced the fighting with so much determination, if not wisdom, on the Union right; up to Fredericksburg, where, after a personal protest to his commanding officer, he went in and fought his troops "until he thought he had lost as many men as he was ordered to lose,"—Hooker's character as man and soldier had been marked. His commands so far had been limited; and he had a frank, manly way of winning the hearts of his soldiers. He was in constant motion about the army while it lay in camp;

his appearance always attracted attention; and he was as well known to almost every regiment as its own commander. He was a representative man.

It is not astonishing that Mr. Lincoln, or the Washington pseudo-strategists who were his military advisers, could not distinguish, in selecting a chief who should be capable of leading the Army of the Potomac to victory, between the gallant corps-commander, who achieves brilliant results under limited responsibility, and the leader, upon whose sole resources of mind and courage devolve not only the instruction for health, equipment, rationing, march, or attack, of each of his subordinates, but the graver weight of prompt and correct decision and immediate action under every one of the kaleidoscopic changes of a campaign or a battle-field. It required more knowledge of the requisites of war, as well as a broader judgment of character, than Mr. Lincoln had had opportunity to form of the several soldiers of the army, to insure a happy choice.

And, doubtless, Hooker's self-assertiveness, success as a brigade, division, and corps commander, and decided appearance of large ability, shared equally in procuring his appointment. No one will deny Hooker's capacity in certain directions, or up to a given test. His whole career shows an exceptional power in "riding to orders." But he sadly lacked that rare combination of qualities and reserve power necessary to lead a hundred and twenty-five thousand men against such a foe as Lee.

Nothing shows more curiously a weak spot in Hooker's character than the odd pride he took in Mr. Lincoln's somewhat equivocal letter to him at the time of his appointment, here following:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, D.C.,
Jan. 26, 1863.
MAJOR-GEN. HOOKER.

General—I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course, I have done this upon what appears to

me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skilful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself; which is a valuable, if not an indispensable, quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother-officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain success can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The Government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done or will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit you have aided to infuse into the army, of criticising their commander and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can to put it down. Neither you nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army while such a spirit prevails in it. And now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance go forward, and give us victories.

Yours very truly,
A. LINCOLN.

Hooker was appointed Jan. 26, 1863; and Burnside, with a few earnest words, took leave of the army.

The troops received their new chief with a heartiness and confidence, which, since McClellan's re-instatement, had not been equalled. Hooker was to all the soul and embodiment of the growth and history of this weather-beaten Army of the

Potomac. And the salutary changes he at once began to make—for Hooker never lacked the power of organization—were accepted with alacrity; and a spirit of cheerful willingness succeeded speedily to what had been almost a defiant obedience.

The army was in a lamentably low state of efficiency. Politics mingled with camp duties; and the disaffection of officers and men, coupled with an entire lack of confidence in the ability of the Army of the Potomac to accomplish any thing, were pronounced. Desertions occurred at the rate of two hundred a day, facilitated by relatives, who sent from home civilian clothing to soldiers at the front. Hooker states that he found 2,922 officers, and 81,964 enlisted men, entered as absent on the rolls of the army, a large proportion from causes unknown. Sharp and efficient measures were at once adopted, which speedily checked this alarming depletion of the ranks. Furloughs in reasonable quantity were allowed to deserving men and a limited number of officers. Work was found for the rank and file in drill and outpost duty sufficient to prevent idle habits. The commissariat was closely watched, and fresh rations more frequently issued, which much improved the health of the army. The system of picket-duty was more thoroughly developed, and so vigilantly carried out as to impress its importance upon, as well as teach its details to, the troops.

The cavalry, hitherto distributed by regiments throughout the army, was now consolidated into one corps, and from this time became a valuable element in the service, for it daily grew in efficiency. And such opportunities of doing field-work as a body were afforded it as circumstances allowed.

The grand divisions of Burnside were abolished, and the army divided into seven infantry corps.

The testimony of all general officers of the Army of the Potomac concurs in awarding the highest praise to Hooker

for the manner in which he improved the condition of the troops during the three months he was in command prior to Chancellorsville. Himself says before the Committee on the Conduct of the War: "During the season of preparation the army made rapid strides in discipline, instruction and morale, and early in April was in a condition to inspire the highest expectations." And Swinton well sums up: "Under Hooker's influence the tone of the army underwent a change which would appear astonishing had not its elastic vitality been so often proved."

On the 30th of April the Army of the Potomac, exclusive of provost-guard, consisted of about a hundred and thirty thousand men under the colors—"for duty equipped," according to the morning report—distributed among the several army corps as follows:—

{ Wadsworth, }
1st Corps, Gen. Reynolds.. { Robinson, } 16,908
{ Doubleday, }
{ Hancock, }
2d Corps, Gen. Couch .. { Gibbon, } 16,893
{ French, }
{ Birney, }
3d Corps, Gen. Sickles.. { Berry, } 18,721
{ Whipple, }

{ Griffin, }
5th Corps, Gen. Meade.. { Humphreys, } 15,724
{ Sykes, }

{ Brooks, }
6th Corps, Gen. Sedgwick.. { Howe, } 23,667
{ Newton, }

{ Devens, }
11th Corps, Gen. Howard.. { Schurz, } 12,977
{ Steinwehr, }

12th Corps, Gen. Slocum.. { Williams, } 13,450
{ Geary, }

{ Pleasonton, }
Cavalry Corps, Gen. Stoneman. { Gregg, } 11,541
{ Averell, }
{ Buford, Reserve Brigade,}

Artillery, Gen. Hunt, about 400 guns. Artillery reserve 1,610

Total 131,491

IV. THE ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA.

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While the Army of the Potomac lay about Falmouth, awaiting orders to move, Lee occupied the heights south of the Rappahannock, from Banks's Ford above, to Port Royal (or Skenker's Neck) below Fredericksburg, a line some fifteen miles in length as the crow flies. The crests of the hills on which lay the Army of Northern Virginia were from three-quarters of a mile to a mile and a half back from, and substantially parallel to, the river. Rifle-pits commanded every available crossing, which, being few and difficult, were easily guarded. Continuous lines of infantry parapets, broken by battery epaulements located for sweeping the wide approaches from the river, extended the whole distance; while abattis strengthened every place which the nature of the ground allowed an attacking column to pass.

The roads by which the various detachments of the army could intercommunicate for concentration upon any given point were numerous and well kept up, and were familiar to all commanding and staff officers.

Lee's forces numbered about sixty thousand men, for duty, distributed in the following organizations. As the brigades nearly equalled our divisions in size, they are given by name.

```
{ Mahone's brigade. }
{ Posey's " }
{ Anderson's { Wilcox's " }
{ division. { Perry's " }
{ { Wright's " }
Part of Longstreet's { } 17,000
1st Corps { { Kershaw's " }
{ McLaws' { Semmes's " }
{ division. { Wofford's " }
{ Barksdale's " }
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{ Heth's " }
{ Pender's " }
{ A. P. Hill's { Archer's " } 11,000
{ division. { McGowan's " }
{ { Lane's " }
{ { Thomas's " }
{
{ { Ramseur's " }
{ D. H. Hill's { Rodes's " }
{ division. { Dole's " } 9,000
{ { Iverson's " }
{ { Colquitt's " }
Jackson's 2d Corps. {
{ { Colston's " }
{ Trimble's { Jones's " } 6,000
{ division. { Nichols's " }
{ { Paxton's " }
{
{ { Gordon's " }
{ Early's { Hays's " } 7,400
{ division. { Smith's " }
{ { Hoke's " }

Stuart's Cavalry { Fitz Hugh Lee's brigade . . 1,800
division { W. H. F. Lee's " ... 900

Artillery, 170 pieces ... . ... . 5,000
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Total ... .. 58,100

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Hotchkiss and Allan state that there may have been three to five thousand more men in line at the time of Hooker's attack.

As will be noticed from the table, only part of Longstreet's corps was present. The main body had been sent, about Feb. 1, under command of its chief, to operate in the region between Petersburg and Suffolk, where our forces under Peck were making a demonstration. This detail reduced Lee's army by nearly one-quarter.

During the winter, Lee's forces had been distributed as follows:—

The old battle-ground of Dec. 13 was occupied by the First Corps; while Jackson with his Second Corps held Hamilton's Crossing, and extended his lines down to Port Royal. Stuart's cavalry division prolonged the left to Beverly Ford on the upper Rappahannock, and scoured the country as far as the Pamunkey region. Hampton's brigade of cavalry had been sent to the rear to recruit, and Fitz Lee's had taken its place

at Culpeper, from which point it extended so as to touch Lee's left flank at Banks's Ford. The brigade of W. H. F. Lee was on the Confederate right. Stuart retained command of the entire force, but had his headquarters at Culpeper.

The supplies of the army were received by the Fredericksburg and Richmond Railroad from the capital, and from the depots on the Virginia Central. Lee had been assiduous in re-organizing his forces, in collecting an abundance of supplies, in checking desertions, and in procuring re-enforcements. And the vigor with which the conscription was pushed swelled his strength so materially that in three months Jackson's corps alone shows an increase from a force of twenty-five thousand up to thirty-three thousand men "for duty." The staff of the army was created a separate organization. The cavalry had already been successfully consolidated. And now the artillery was embodied in a special organization under Gen. Pendleton, and an engineer regiment put on foot.

The morale of the Army of Northern Virginia could not be finer. The forced retreat of McClellan from before Richmond; the driving of Pope from his vaunted positions in its front; the Maryland campaign with its deliberate withdrawal from an army of twice its strength; finally the bloody check to Burnside—had furnished a succession of triumphs which would lend any troops self-confidence and high courage. But, in addition to all this, the average of the men of this army were older and more hardened soldiers than those of the Army of the Potomac. The early conscription acts of the Confederacy had made it difficult for men once inured to the steady bearing and rough life of the soldier, and to the hard fare of camp-life, to withdraw from the ranks.

In Hooker's testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War occurs this tribute to the Confederate infantry: "Our artillery had always been superior to that of the rebels, as was also our infantry, except in discipline; and