Aware of President Lincoln’s mounting frustration in the autumn of 1863 over his failure to bring Robert E. Lee to battle, Major General George G. Meade made plans to turn the Army of Northern Virginia’s flank by crossing the Rapidan River to the east of the Confederate lines and then marching the Army of the Potomac west through the scrub woods of the Wilderness. Meade crossed the Rapidan on November 26, but decided on November 30 not to attack Lee’s strong defensive position along Mine Run and withdrew across the river on December 1. In his official report, submitted on December 7, Meade admitted that the campaign had been “a failure,” but insisted the causes of its failure “were beyond my control.” He cited Major General William H. French’s delays in advancing the Third Corps on November 26–27 as “one of the primary causes of the failure of the whole movement” and criticized Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, the commander of the Second Corps, for his “unfortunate error in judgment” in not attacking on the morning of November 30. The failure at Mine Run caused Lincoln, Secretary of War Stanton, and General-in-chief Henry W. Halleck to consider replacing Meade, but no decision was made. Meade wrote to his wife after returning to his headquarters near Brandy Station, Virginia.

Head-Quarters, Army of the Potomac,  
Decr. 2d.—1863.

Dear Margaret—

I expect your wishes will now soon be gratified;—and that I shall be relieved from the Army of the Potomac. The facts are briefly these.—On the 26th ulto. I crossed the Rapidan intending to turn the right flank of Genl. Lee, and attack him, or compel him to attack me out of his formidable river entrenchments.—I had previously been advised by deserters & others, that he had commenced a line of works running perpendicular to the river, but only extending a few miles, by which he designed covering his flank, and permitting him to
leave the lower fords unguarded.—I accordingly made my plans to cross in 3 columns, to unite at a common point below his entrenchments, and then to advance rapidly & attack him before he could prepare any defences. The plan was a good one, but owing to the failure of others to whom its execution was necessarily entrusted it failed.—In the first place, one corps was three hours behind time in arriving at the river and slow of movement afterwards, which caused a delay of one day—enabled the enemy to advance & check my columns before they united, & finally to concentrate his army, in a very formidable position, behind entrenchments almost as strong as those I was making a long detour to avoid. Again after I had come up with the enemy one corps commander reported he had examined a position, where there was not the slightest doubt he could carry the enemy's works & on his positive & unhesitating judgement, he was given 28,000 men, and directed to attack the next morning at 8 o'clock. At the same time another attack was to be made by 15,000 men at a point where the enemy evidently was not fully prepared.—On the eventful morning, just as the attack was about being made, I received a despatch from the officer commanding the 28,000 men saying he had changed his opinion, and that the attack on his front was so hopeless, that he had assumed the responsibility of suspending it, till further orders were received.—This astounding intelligence reached me just 10 minutes before the hour for attacking, and barely in time to suspend the other attack, which was a secondary one & which even if successful could not be supported with so large a portion of my force away for the main attack.—This lost me another day during which the enemy so strengthened the point threatened by the secondary attack, as to render it nearly as strong as the rest of his line, and to have almost destroyed, the before probable chances of success. Finding no possibility of attacking with hope of success, and power to follow up success, and that the only weak point visible, had been strengthened during the delay caused by the change of opinion of a corps commander—I determined not to attempt an assault.

I could not move any further round the enemy's flank, for want of roads, and from the danger, at this season of the year of a storm, which could render locomotion, off the prepared
roads a matter of impossibility.—After reviewing all the circumstances, notwithstanding my most earnest desire to give battle, and in the full consciousness of the fact, that my failure to do so, was certain personal ruin—I having come to the conclusion that an attack could not be successful determined to, & did withdraw the army. I am fully aware it will be said, I did wrong in deciding this question by reasoning, and that I ought to have tried & then a failure would have been evidence of my good judgement, but I trust I have too much reputation as a General, to be obliged to encounter certain defeat, in order to prove that victory was not possible. Political considerations will however enter largely into the decision, and the failure of the Army of the Potomac to do any thing at this moment will be considered of vital consequence and if I can be held responsible for this failure, I will be removed to prove that I am. I therefore consider my fate as settled; but as I have told you before I would rather be ignominiously dismissed, and suffer any thing, than knowingly and willfully have thousands of brave men slaughtered for nothing. It was my deliberate judgement that I ought not to attack. I acted on that judgement, and I am willing to stand or fall by it at all hazards. I shall write to the President giving him a clear statement of the case, and endeavoring to free his action as much as possible, by assuming myself all the responsibility.—I feel of course greatly disappointed—a little more good fortune, and I should have met with brilliant success. As it is my conscience is clear—I did the best I could. If I had thought there was any reasonable degree of probability of success, I would have attacked. I did not think so—on the contrary believed it would result in a useless & criminal slaughter of brave men, and might result in serious disaster to the army—I determined not to attack no other movements were practicable & I withdrew.

There will be a great howl all over the country. Letter writers & politicians will denounce me. It will be proved as clear as the light of day, that an attack was perfectly practicable, and that every one except myself in the army particularly the soldiers, were dying for it and that I had some mysterious object in view either in connection with politics, or stock-jobbing or some thing else about as foreign to my thoughts—and finally the administration will be obliged to yield to popular clamor
and discard me. For all this I am prepared justified as I said before by a clear conscience, and the conviction that I have acted from a high sense of duty, to myself as a soldier, to my men as their General, and to my country and its cause, as the agent having its vital interests solemnly entrusted to me, which I have no right to wantonly play with, and to jeopardize either for my own personal benefit, or to satisfy the demands of popular clamor, or interested politicians.—I should like this letter shown confidentially to Cortlandt Parker, Mr. Harding, & other friends, whose good opinion I am anxious to preserve. George was sent with one of the messages to suspend the attack—his horse fell with him—he was a little bruised & cut about the eye, but nothing serious.—I have received your letter of the 30th ulto. Good bye.

Ever yours. G. G. Meade

Head-Quarters, Army of the Potomac, Decr. 7th 1863

Dear Margaret,

I received today your letter of the 5th inst.—I am yet on the anxious bench—not one word has been vouchsafed me from Washington. The papers of course you have seen, but there was one article in the Washington Star, said to have been inspired from high official quarters, which was very severe on me. It was headed “Hesitating Generals”—and referred to my failure at Williamsport—to my running away from Lee with double the number of men, and to my recent fiasco, as all combining to show I was not competent to command an army. I should hardly suppose any official, claiming respect would choose as a machine for conveying his ideas to the public such a disreputable sheet as the Star whose drunken editor is the horror of all who know him. Still other indications that have reached me would confirm the report that the article was by authority & is a premonition of my approaching fate. I understand from an officer just returned from Washington, that on meeting a prominent member of the Govt, he was asked if the Army of the Potomac has stopped running yet? and whether there were any fighting men in it among the Generals? To day
I sent in my official report in which I have told the plain truth—acknowledged the movement was a failure but claimed the causes were not in my plans, but in the want of support & co-operation on the part of subordinates.—I dont know whether my report will be published, but if it is it will make a sensation, and undoubtedly result in some official investigation. I have received a very kind letter from Cortlandt Parker, (written before he had received yours) in which he sympathizes with me in the failure, but says he is satisfied I have done right, and that I have not lost the confidence of intelligent people, and he hopes I will not resign but hold on to the last.—I have also received a very kind & complimentary letter from Gibbon saying he had as much confidence as ever in my ability to command and that military men would sustain me.—I telegraphed Genl. Halleck that I desired to visit Washn. but his reply was couched in such terms, that tho it gave me permission to go, clearly intimated my presence was not desired, so far as he was concerned. I have in consequence not gone, and now shall not go unless they send for me.—I am only concerned for my reputation as a soldier—if I can preserve that they are at liberty to deprive me of command & even of rank.—

I see the Herald inspired by my friend Dan Sickles, is constantly harping on the assertion that Gettysburgh was fought by the corps commanders (ie D. S.) and the common soldiers & that no Generalship was displayed. I suppose after a while it will be discovered, I was not at Gettysburgh at all. We have had very cold weather, but George & I continue quite well. I hope Sergie will soon be well again. Love & kisses to all the children. Ever yours

G. G. Meade