I have chosen two letters from the mid-Civil War period, around which a fruitful lesson might be woven. Both missives were sent in the aftermath of the titanic confrontation of the armies at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1-3, 1863. With that common context, both documents convey revelations as to certain major principals of the War which illuminate the frustrations emanating from the battle’s result, as well as the toll which is perforce inflicted on individuals, descending from the responsibilities inherent in high command.

The letter in the G/L document summary is from Abraham Lincoln to George Gordon Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac. Initially, it seems to have been prompted by the General’s petulant offer to General-in-Chief Halleck that he step down, owing to rumors as to Lincoln’s dissatisfaction with Meade’s failure to aggressively pursue the Army of Northern Virginia after the battle. Poor General Meade has been given rather short shrift by historians, having been thrown into the top job rather as an afterthought and then relegated to invisibility later on with the arrival of U.S. Grant in the east; all this, despite a very creditable performance at Fredericksburg and his triumph at Gettysburg. Lincoln uses this preemptive letter not only to smooth his General’s ruffled feathers, but to cite, patiently but firmly, the wellsprings of his dissatisfaction: Meade’s disinclination to seek “a collision with the enemy”; the diminished state of Lee’s force in the wake of his defeat; along with the priceless opportunity offered by the flooding Potomac, a most formidable obstacle to his successful escape. “He (Lee) was within your easy grasp,” Lincoln despaired, but now “your golden opportunity is gone.” Lincoln, of course, had seen this movie before, in McClellan’s reluctance to pursue the Confederates following the Battle of Antietam.

In a sense, my second document is also from a commander-in-chief, for Robert E. Lee was, to all intents and purposes Lincoln’s counterpart in the making of grand strategic decisions. It is taken from Scribner’s Monthly for February, 1864 and reprinted in the New York Times on January 23, 1876 (http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FB081FFF3D55177893C1AB178AD85F428784F9). Lee, of course, had been defeated at Gettysburg, and knew that, in Trumanesque parlance, the “buck stopped with him.” Just as Meade had done, the great commander tendered his resignation to Jefferson Davis, in part also responding to “expressions of discontent in the public journals.” Citing genuine ill-health and certain doubts as to the degree of confidence in him within the army, he also confessed, rather cryptically, that “I am so dull that in making use of the eyes of others I am misled.” As with the victorious General Meade, the Gettysburg episode had been dreadful, if not catastrophic. But unlike Meade, Lee must have known his offer to resign would not be accepted.

With students, these letters offer myriad opportunities to consider questions both of tactical and leadership analysis with respect to this moment in Civil War time, to wit:
1. Were Lincoln’s criticisms of Meade justified, especially in light of the carnage suffered by the Union Army at Gettysburg?
2. What historical antecedents (mentioned above) informed Lincoln’s strategic assessment of Meade’s laggardly pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia?
3. How must General Meade have felt, receiving such detailed and pointed criticism from his Commander-in-Chief on the heels of the Army of the Potomac’s greatest victory to date?
4. What was Robert E. Lee’s object in his letter? To offer public penance? To take his critics to task? Seriously to step down from his command? Or was this a matter of honor, to assume responsibility by surrendering the helm? And if so, did the offer stem from genuine remorse or a variety of (gasp) faux self-criticism, which he felt might be safely deflected directed toward others?
5. Perhaps most importantly, are there insights within these letters which contradict the often assumed preeminence of the Battle of Gettysburg as the “turning point of the Civil War”?