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Rethinking Sherman's March

By **W. Todd Groce** November 17, 2014 7:55 pm

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

The March to the Sea has come down to us as an act of savage brutality perpetrated by one of the great villains of American history. Just the mention of William Tecumseh Sherman's name conjures images of burning cities, ransacked plantations and terror stricken women and children, à la "Gone with the Wind." Even after the passage of 150 years and dozens of scholarly books on the general and his march, most conversations about Sherman continue to generate more heat than light.

After three years of fighting and over half a million dead, by the fall of 1864 the United States still had not suppressed what Union leaders considered a slaveholders' rebellion and arguably the most potent threat ever posed to the nation's existence. Faced with continued resistance and climbing casualty figures, Sherman decided that the time had come to widen the burden and pain of the war beyond just rebel soldiers to include the civilian supporters of the Confederacy, especially the common folk who filled the ranks of the rebel armies.

Sherman believed that forcing noncombatants to feel what he called the "hard hand of war" was a military necessity. Making the war as harsh as possible would bring victory more quickly and with a minimum loss of life on both sides, undermine Confederate morale on the home front, trigger a wave of desertions from the insurgent armies, destroy the Confederacy's ability to wage war and prove to the

rebels that their cause was hopeless and their government impotent to protect them and their property.

This new “hard war” doctrine was fully sanctioned by the United States government. The previous year, President Abraham Lincoln had approved the creation of the Lieber Code, a set of rules based on accepted practices that authorized the Army to destroy civilian property, starve noncombatants, shell towns, keep enemy civilians in besieged cities, free slaves and summarily execute guerrillas if such measures were deemed necessary to winning the war and defending the country. “To save the country,” the code’s author, the Columbia law professor Francis Lieber, stated, “is paramount to all other considerations.” Like other wartime chief executives right down to the present day, Lincoln was willing to take drastic measures to ensure the survival of the United States.

So on Nov. 15, 1864, Sherman’s army set out from Atlanta on its infamous March to the Sea, cutting a swath of destruction toward Savannah on the coast. Sherman swore to “make Georgia howl,” and in his Special Field Order No. 120 he laid out the rules of destruction and conduct for the march. The army was to “forage liberally on the country” with details of men and officers sent out each day to gather food. Soldiers were instructed not to enter private homes and to discriminate between the rich, “who are usually hostile,” Sherman observed, and the poor and industrious, who were usually “neutral or friendly.”

To be sure, there was more destruction than allowed by these orders. Sherman’s soldiers, as the historian Joseph Glatthaar has written, saw this “as a golden opportunity to teach the people of Georgia ... the hardships and terrors of [a] war” which they blamed Confederates for starting and continuing, despite repeated defeats on the battlefield. Some homes, especially those of wealthy slaveholders considered guilty of bringing on the war, were burned; private dwellings were entered and personal property was taken or ruined; and civilians were stripped of more food than the army needed or could possibly consume. Beyond food and livestock, high-value targets included anything that could be used by the Confederates to continue the struggle: factories, mills, cotton gins, warehouses, train

Still, in Georgia relatively few private homes, like that of Howell Cobb (a former federal official deemed a traitor by Sherman) or those adjacent to factories and mills, were burned. One study conducted during the 1930s comparing wartime maps with existing antebellum structures found that most along the route of the march were still standing and those that were gone had been lost largely due to postwar accidents. And despite the commonly held belief, reinforced by the movie “Gone with the Wind,” that Sherman reduced the entire city of Atlanta to a smoldering ruin, approximately half of it was completely destroyed, roughly the same proportion of Chambersburg, Penn. that had been burned by Confederates the previous July.

As its author intended, the March to the Sea was harsh on civilians. Losing crops, food stores and livestock left non-combatants with little to eat as winter approached. But the fear Sherman created was as powerful as his acts of destruction. The sight of federal troops, marching across the state destroying property and pillaging virtually unopposed, had a demoralizing effect on white Georgians who supported the Confederacy.

By waging war against the minds of his opponents, Sherman’s march achieved its creator’s goal of hastening an end to the conflict: the wives of Confederate soldiers along the route of the march or who feared they lay in the path of Sherman’s advancing legions begged their husbands to come home, and desertions increased significantly during the fall and winter of 1864-65. This hemorrhaging from Gen. Robert E. Lee’s army in Virginia further depleted his already thin ranks and allowed Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to deliver the knockout blow in the spring of 1865.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, Sherman’s way of war seems a dramatic departure from earlier methods and has prompted some historians to characterize his March to the Sea as the birth of modern total war. But “hard war” was not total war. While the march destroyed property and infrastructure and visited suffering and fear on the civilian population, it lacked the wholesale destruction of human life that characterized World War II.

Sherman’s primary targets — foodstuffs and industrial, government and military property — were carefully chosen to create the desired effect, and never included mass killing of civilians, especially those law-abiding noncombatants who did not

resist what Sherman described as the national authority. Indeed, Sherman always claimed that his war on property was more humane than traditional methods of conflict between armies. He even told one South Carolina woman that he was ransacking her plantation so that her soldier husband would come home and Grant would not have to kill him in the trenches at Petersburg. He was fighting to bring rebels back into the Union, not to annihilate them.

At the end of his march, when the people of Savannah surrendered virtually without a fight — they were “completely subjugated,” he wrote — he saw no need to wreck the city’s military and industrial facilities or destroy private homes. Five months earlier, Sherman had told the mayor of Atlanta, “If you and your citizens will give up, I and this army will become your greatest protectors,” and it was a lesson not lost on Savannahians. The fate of the city where the March to the Sea ended was different from the one where it began.

Sherman demonstrated for the first time in the modern era the power of terror and psychological warfare in breaking an enemy’s will to resist. This concept would come into full bloom during World War II when both Axis and Allied powers deliberately and indiscriminately bombed civilians in order to create terror and win the war by any means at their disposal — including dropping two atomic bombs. It would be seen again during the Vietnam War when America bombed Hanoi, dropping on a single city more ordnance than the United States dropped in all of World War II.

Indeed, America in the 20th century waged total war to such a frightening extent that one wonders: If Sherman had commanded in World War II or Vietnam, would his detractors be so repelled by him, especially those white Southerners taught to hate him as a war criminal? If he had served in the same army a century later and had worn khaki or green rather than blue, and if his targets had been Germans, Japanese, Vietnamese or Islamic terrorists rather than Confederates, would we still loathe him to the same degree?

Francis Lieber’s words written in 1862 — “To save the country is paramount to all other considerations” — could have been spoken by the generals Omar Bradley or George Patton as they smashed their way through another German town, or Curtis

LeMay as he ordered the firebombing of Japanese cities. History has deemed them heroes because their actions were against their country's foreign foes, while Sherman has been vilified as a terrorist because his actions, although less severe, were against his country's domestic enemies.

Rightly or wrongly, Sherman did what he deemed militarily necessary within the rules laid down by his government to win the conflict and save his country. Rather than an aberration, his "hard hand of war" fits well within the American military tradition. Like the total war tactics of his 20th century successors and the "enhanced interrogation techniques" employed more recently, the March to the Sea reveals the moral ambiguity of war and the extent to which Americans are willing to go when our national existence is at stake.

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Sources: Lee Kennett, "Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians During Sherman's Campaign"; Anne J. Bailey, "War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign"; Stephen Davis, "What the Yankees Did to Us: Sherman's Bombardment and Wrecking of Atlanta"; Joseph T. Glatthaar, "The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaign"; Mark Grimsley, "The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865"; John F. Marszalek, "Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order"; Noah Andre Trudeau, "Southern Storm: Sherman's March to the Sea"; William T. Sherman, "Memoirs of General William T. Sherman"; John Fabian Witt, "Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History."

W. Todd Groce is president and chief executive of the Georgia Historical Society and the author of several books on the Civil War and American military history, including "Mountain Rebels: East Tennessee Confederates and the Civil War, 1860-1870."