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American Terror

For 150 years, those that have come to call the American Civil War “the War of Northern Aggression” have cited General William Tecumseh Sherman’s March to the Sea as an unnecessary act of terror; opponents claim the South would have surrendered without this show of brutality, and that what he did was completely illegal from a humanitarian perspective—they are wrong. William Tecumseh Sherman’s March to the Sea was a brutal affair, filled with what many Southerners argued to be war crimes; but, these actions can, in truth, be interpreted to have roughly followed today’s laws of war, even though they did not yet exist in Sherman’s time. War is brutal, dehumanizing, and degrading, and this campaign was simply a product of the time and a necessary evil. By examining the campaign through both Federal and Confederate accounts of the events, as well as the modern laws of war, it can be demonstrated that Sherman’s campaign was, in fact, legitimate, legal, and entirely necessary.

For 400 miles and 36 days, from Savannah to Charleston, Sherman and his army leveled buildings, tore up every railroad, and killed or ate much of the livestock in their way—in short, they devastated the South. Georgia and South Carolina were left in shambles in the wake of the Federals. Oftentimes, only chimneys remained of plantations, which the Federals quickly dubbed

“monuments.”¹ By one soldier’s estimate, the Union seized or otherwise destroyed “100,000 hogs, 20,000 head of cattle, 15,000 horses and mules, 500,000 bushels of corn, [and] 100,000 of sweet potatoes.”² Federal soldiers also came to be known for their efficient destruction of rail lines in the South, and CPT Charles Wills concluded that “the destruction of railroad property has been complete when-ever within our reach.”³ The destruction crippled the two states for decades after that war, and caused an uproar within the South that persists to this day.

So, how can such destruction be considered legal? The modern laws of war work on 5 principles:

- We will not inflict unnecessary destruction or suffering.
- We will treat prisoners of war, captured or detained personnel, and civilians humanely.
- We will not obey orders whose executions are in violation of the laws of war.
- We are responsible for our unlawful acts.
- We are entitled to humane treatment if captured.⁴

Of the 5, 1 is an entitlement, and the rest are guidelines for warfare. Sherman’s campaign follows all of these laws to the highest extent possible for an Army of the time. When destruction

¹ Patrick, Jeffrey L., and Robert Willey. "We Have Surely Done a Big Work": The Diary of a Hoosier Soldier on Sherman's "March to the Sea" Indiana Magazine of History 94, no. 3 (1998): 214-39.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27792098>. Pg.231

² Charles Wills, Full text of "Army life of an Illinois soldier, including a day by day record of Sherman's march to the sea; letters and diary of the late Charles W. Wills, private and sergeant 8th Illinois Infantry; lieutenant and battalion adjutant 7th Illinois Cavalry; captain, major and lieutenant colonel 103rd Illinois Infantry" Washington D.C. Globe Printing Company, 1906. Dec 6, 1864 Entry

³ Charles Wills, "Army life," Dec 6, 1864 Entry

⁴ U.S. Army Cadet Command. "Law of Land Warfare." Course Curriculum, MSL 202 Army Doctrine and Team Development, November 30, 2015. Pg.1

is wreaked it is almost always for specific military purposes. His men answer for inflicting unnecessary suffering, and civilians often are left unharmed in his wake, with only possessions missing. This is not to say that no illegal action occurred, but his Army was still controlled.

It is also vital to explain the principles and definitions of the terms Unnecessary Suffering and of proportionality. The Principle of Proportionality states that “Loss of civilian life and damage to civilian property (collateral damage) must not be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage gained by an attack.”⁵ The principle accepts that civilian casualties are an unfortunate reality of war, but reinforces to commanders that every effort must be made to spare their lives from the fighting. The term Unnecessary Suffering states that “it is forbidden for Soldiers to use arms, projectiles, or material CALCULATED to cause UNNECESSARY SUFFERING. The rule prohibits weapons which cause unnecessary suffering (i.e. fragmenting bullets) and the use of lawful weapons in a manner designed to cause unnecessary suffering”.⁶ Unnecessary suffering is thus not defined as stopping discomfort from losing one’s home or livelihood, but from stopping agonizing wounds and deaths.

In fact, by modern standards Sherman’s campaign follows more advanced principles of warfighting—the real reason that Sherman is remembered for his brutality is because he was the only man in the Civil War fighting a total war. By comparison to his counterparts, both Northern and Southern, Sherman was brutal and unflinching, and the only one to wage a psychological war against the entirety of the South. He aimed to show them that so long as they were his enemy they would receive no quarter, but if they returned to the Union he was gracious and welcoming. The other Generals of his day limited themselves to only fighting the opposing Armies, while

⁵ U.S. Army Cadet Command. “Law of Land Warfare.” Pg.2

⁶ U.S. Army Cadet Command. “Law of Land Warfare.” Pg.2

Sherman fought to end the war from the use of overwhelming power and spectacular displays of force in order to freeze enemy commanders and civilian leaders—forcing them into perceiving the war as unwinnable. Later generations would call this strategy “Shock and Awe.”

From the destruction of the South, hope for millions was born, and the largest redeeming factor for this campaign is realized. Thousands of slaves were freed from their forced labor, and represented a huge loss in economic power for the Southerners, but more importantly, this campaign was a major humanitarian victory. Because of their exploitation of human labor to fund and support the Southern war effort, the plantations themselves shifted from civilian targets to military targets. This paradigm shift uses the same logic that would later allow the legal targeting of civilian factories supporting the war effort in WWII. These plantations were more akin to forced labor camps, and represented such a clear, viable threat to human life and well-being that their destruction and liberation by the Federals was necessitated. With the plantations that they were forced to work on effectively destroyed, former slaves were free to escape their enslavers and run to their new, uncertain freedom.

Federal Soldiers targeted plantations and other soft targets for destruction while under orders and of their own accord; and, while some crime did occur in these actions, CPT Wills also recalls his annoyance with the 26th general order’s constant repetition. “[We] had general order No 26 read to us for I guess the 20th time. It declares that ‘any soldier or army follower who shall be convicted of the crime of arson or robbery, or who shall be caught pillag-ing, shall be shot, and gives officers and non-commissioned ditto the right to shoot pillagers in the act.’”⁷ Thus, at least for CPT Wills and his men from Illinois, pillaging on a grand scale was limited

⁷ Charles Wills, "Army life," Nov 26, 1864 Entry

only to targets designated from higher commands or determined to be necessary for the war effort by local command. Historians would later also note that

despite the claims of many southerners and even some northerners, Sherman's army should not shoulder the entire blame for the destruction in Georgia. It is clear that Union deserters, slaves, civilians, and Confederate deserters and cavalry units played a part in the looting and pillaging as well. It must also be pointed out that even though a large amount of personal property was stolen or destroyed by the Federals, few civilians were physically harmed, and their homes were generally left intact.⁸

It is then vital to note that much of the destruction of soft, non-military, non-economic targets that is often attributed to Sherman was, in truth, not the handiwork of his men. Sherman set the South into disarray, but the chaos that was the South collapsing caused more damage than any Federal.

Several accounts exist showing Federal soldiers and Southerners actually behaving amicably, even hospitably with one another. CPT Wills writes: “by the kindness of Mrs. Elizabeth Celia Pye, I occupy a feather bed to-night. It is the first house I have been in for the last three months. She understood from the Rebels that we burned all houses and she took all her things out and hid them in the woods. The foragers found them and brought them in to her.”⁹ In this individual case, Mrs. Pye, despite her initial fear of the Federals, had her belongings returned by the Soldiers and the two groups existed peacefully. CPT Wills notes in the very next entry in his journal that “I think there is less pillaging this trip than I ever saw before”.¹⁰

Likewise, SGT William Bluffington Miller, a Soldier from Indiana, recalled a similar event in Georgia, writing in his journal “[we] moved on a Short distance to Louisville which we

⁸ Patrick, Jeffrey L., and Robert Willey. ““We Have Surely Done a Big Work”: The Diary of a Hoosier Soldier on Sherman's “March to the Sea”” *Indiana Magazine of History* 94, no. 3 (1998): 214-39.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27792098>. Pg.217

⁹ Charles Wills, “Army life,” Nov 19, 1864 Entry

¹⁰ Charles Wills, “Army life,” Nov 26, 1864 Entry

found on fire. The report is a woman spit in a Yankees face and called him names and he set the house on fire and it burned several others and the Regiment was orderd to put out the fire and protect the town against any further damage”.¹¹ His account shows that the Federals were made to defend innocents from unnecessary destruction. His entire Regiment acted as firemen, taking away from the fighting ability of the men, then denying them rest by forcing them to guard against further damage. These two instances, though surely not the whole story, show that Federal Soldiers worked in tandem with Confederate citizens peacefully, coming to their aid when called upon.

Here though, the writers met already friendly civilians or people that needed something from them, but CPT Wills also shows the restraint of his Soldiers when prodded by Confederate-supporting civilians as well. “At one house we passed this morning we saw three of the ugliest-looking women imaginable. All three were singing a Rebel song. Some of the men recognized the tune as [‘Rebel Soldier,’ and] were so completely surprised and thunderstruck by the show that they had not a word to say”.¹² Here, CPT Wills’ men had plenty of provocation to take regrettable action against the women. These women stood in front of this Company of battle-hardened Federal Soldiers and had the nerve to sing the song of Johnny Reb. Men like that are no strangers to violence, and nothing was physically stopping them from raping and killing the women, then burning their home to ash. Yet these Soldiers simply kept marching silently while allowing the women to finish their song. This individual act demonstrates the restraint that was

¹¹ Patrick, Jeffrey L., and Robert Willey. ""We Have Surely Done a Big Work": The Diary of a Hoosier Soldier on Sherman's "March to the Sea"" Indiana Magazine of History 94, no. 3 (1998): 214-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27792098>. Pg.225

¹² Charles Wills, Full text of "Army life," Oct 21, 1864 Entry

beaten into the men from their superiors, and that they all knew they would answer for any illegal acts they commit with their lives.

Sherman's men did in fact hold to modern laws of war and more represent a modern Army than any other of the time. Sherman's men did inflict destruction and suffering, but they were adequately restrained as shown by their refusal to attack the singing women, their cooperation with civilians, and the fact that they were willing to work as an impromptu fire brigade. Their treatment of captured non-fighting personnel often was simply leaving them where they found them, and fighters were sent to the rear for processing. CPT Wills' "fond" recollection of the 26th general order demonstrates the commitment of the Army to making its Soldiers responsible for their illegal acts. Sherman's discipline, strategy, and demeanor more reflect a modern General than any of his peers.

While the campaign is remembered by many as a brutal action that annihilated the South beyond the scope of the war, Sherman's march was, in fact, a necessary act that drastically shortened the war effort. His revolutionary Shock and Awe-style strategy proved its effectiveness and destroyed the enemy's will to fight. So effective was this strategy that many Confederate soldiers simply stopped writing in their journals during that time and the rest of the world adopted this total war strategy for the wars to come in the 20th century.¹³ Without being put down, the South would have fought till the last, but Sherman prevented an untellable amount

¹³ Scott, John Thomas Harper letters (1861-1865) (Auburn University Library)
<http://content.lib.auburn.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/civil2/id/21333/rec/9>

Crittenden, John letters (1862-1865) (Auburn University Library)
<http://content.lib.auburn.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/civil2/id/17794/rec/10>

Smith, Henry A. diary (1864) (Auburn University Library)
<http://content.lib.auburn.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/civil/id/21469/rec/4>

of death and destruction that would have come from an extended war. Like firefighters burning sections of forest in order to contain a wildfire, Sherman snuffed out the fuel for the South's war effort—he snuffed out the very soul of the rebellion.

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