TOTAL WAR AND SHERMAN’S MARCH TO VICTORY
“War is hell.”¹ So spoke Union General William Tecumseh Sherman. While certainly not the first military commander in history to say it, he is the general most often quoted as saying it, and perhaps one of the most familiar with the hell that is war. There is a well-known saying that armies are always fighting the last war. That was certainly true in the case of the United States Civil War. Both the Union and the Confederacy engaged in Napoleonic battle tactics and war strategy from the outset. Both sides eagerly sought that one decisive battle that would determine the outcome of the war. But, this war was different, and victory would require a fundamental shift in both battle and war strategy. Through his audacious march to the sea and north through the Carolinas, General Sherman provided that necessary shift. Sherman developed and executed a strategy of what would come to be called total war. He made war not only upon the Confederate army, but upon the South as a whole. Had Sherman not engaged in total war tactics, the South could have continued the war indefinitely and perhaps even gained a negotiated peace.

The term “total war” was first coined in 1927 by Italian General Guilio Douhet. Douhet described total war as “the entire population and all the resources of a nation are sucked into the maw of war.”² In a 1964 essay historian and journalist Bruce Catton stated that “in a total war the enemy’s economy is to be undermined in any way possible.”³ Catton’s description of total war works hand in hand with historian James McPherson’s expanded definition of total war as “a war between peoples rather than simply between armies, a war in which the fighting left nothing untouched or unchanged.”⁴ Thus when taken together, the best definition of total war can be

² Mark E. Neely, Jr., “Was the Civil War a Total War?” in On the Road to Total War, ed. Stig Forster and Jorg Nagler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 33.
³ Ibid., 32.
⁴ Ibid., 33.
summarized as a war in which the whole of a society is engaged and suffers from the consequences of the conflict.\textsuperscript{5}

While unquestionably not the first war in history to utilize the tactics of total war, the Civil War is the first war to which the term is applied. Historian John Bennett Walters is credited with first applying the term to the United States Civil War, and in his analysis of Sherman’s tactics Walters observed: \textsuperscript{6} “By paralyzing the enemy’s economy he destroyed its ability to supply its armies; and by despoiling and scattering the families of the soldiers in the opposing army, he undermined the morale of the military forces of the Confederacy.”\textsuperscript{7} Walters’ description of Sherman’s actions is perhaps the most accurate depiction of the effectiveness of total war. Sherman’s strategy of cutting off his supply lines and foraging off the land through which his troops travelled left Georgia and the Carolinas with no food, livestock, and, in many cases, homes. Sherman effectively destroyed not only the economy of the South but the morale of Confederate forces. The Confederate army experienced mass desertions as soldiers rushed home to attend to devastated families and farms.\textsuperscript{8} This is why total war is effective. It destroys the enemy’s resources on every front. The economy is destroyed, morale is crushed, and the enemy’s ability to effectively field an army is utterly obliterated.

In the fall of 1864 the Union and the Confederacy and had fought the War to a virtual stalemate. Confederate General Lee was thoroughly entrenched at Petersburg and prepared to

\textsuperscript{5} For a more in depth discussion and definition of total war, see Gervase Phillips, “Was the American Civil War the First Modern War?” \textit{History Review} no. 56 (December 2006): 28.

\textsuperscript{6} Neely, “Was the Civil War a Total War?”, 32.


withstand a long siege by Union General Grant.⁹ General Sherman had been engaged in a months-long attempt to take the city of Atlanta and was being held at bay by Confederate General John B. Hood.¹⁰ Both the North and the South were fighting holding actions rather than taking decisive military action to advance the progress of the War. The stalemate benefitted only the South and in fact, General Grant believed that “[a]nything that could have prolonged the war a year beyond the time that it did finally close, would probably have exhausted the North to such an extent that they might then have abandoned the contest and agreed to a separation.”¹¹

Confederate leaders believed that if they could continue fighting a defensive action and maintain the stalemate, eventually they would win recognition and a separation from the Union.¹² Of key import to that strategy was the South’s ability to feed and supply its army and the unwavering belief that victory was at hand. During the War, Georgia served as the breadbasket of the South and supplied the provisions necessary to feed the Confederate Army. Confederate President Jefferson Davis noted “The State of Georgia alone produces food enough not only for her own people and the army within it but feeds, too, the Army of Virginia.”¹³ Georgia was vital to the Confederate war effort. So long as the South could feed its troops it could continue fighting the defensive action that it had fought since the beginning. Following the reelection of President Lincoln in November 1864, President Davis stated that “Nothing has changed in the purpose of [the South’s] Government, in the indomitable valor of its troops, or in the unquenchable spirit of

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⁹ Ibid., 458-62.

¹⁰ Ibid., 463-70.


¹² McPherson and Hogue, Ordeal by Fire, 456-70.

its people. . . . There is no military success of the enemy which can accomplish its destruction."

The determination of the South to continue to fight the war cannot be questioned. Thus, it was with this state of affairs in mind that General Sherman began to craft his grand strategy to “destroy Atlanta and march across Georgia to Savannah . . . breaking roads and doing irreparable damage.”

On September 3, 1864 the city of Atlanta finally fell to General Sherman. Seeing the fall of Atlanta as his opportunity to strike deep into the heart of the South, Sherman began to lobby General Grant and President Lincoln for permission to sever his supply lines and march 60,000 veteran troops 285 miles through Georgia to the sea. In a letter to General Grant outlining his plan, Sherman wrote “Until we can repopulate Georgia it is useless to occupy it, but the utter destruction of its roads, houses and people will cripple their military . . . I can make the march and make Georgia howl.”

Despite Sherman’s confidence, President Lincoln was deeply concerned that Union forces would be unable to aid Sherman should he encounter strong resistance and that any misstep by General Sherman would be disastrous to the Union Army. Lincoln was also hesitant to inflict harsh treatment upon the people of the South because of his desire to reunite the nation as a whole. However, Lincoln also recognized that “[p]unishment might become an element of military strategy.” In a last ditch effort to convince the President and General Grant to authorize the march, Sherman wrote “If we can march a well-appointed army right through

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14 McPherson, James, Tried by War (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 250.
15 Weigley, The American Way of War, 149.
16 McPherson, Tried by War, 251.
17 Gray, “The March to the Sea.”, 111.
18 McPherson, Tried by War, 253.
Jefferson Davis’s] territory it is a demonstration to the world, foreign and domestic, that we have power which Davis cannot resist. This may not be war, but rather statesmanship.”

It was the statesmanship argument that finally won Lincoln over to Sherman’s cause. General Grant authorized Sherman to march with the brief message of “[g]o as you propose.” On November 15, 1865 Sherman mustered his troops in Atlanta and began to cut a swath of destruction through Georgia.

Before departing Atlanta, Sherman ordered the controlled destruction of the military resources of the city of Atlanta. In a letter to the Atlanta City Council ordering the evacuation of all civilians from the city, Sherman wrote: “Now, I know the vindictive nature of our enemy, and that we may have many years of military operations from this quarter, and, therefore, deem it wise and prudent to prepare in time.” Thus in order to ensure the city of Atlanta could provide no further support to the Confederate Army or in any way take action against the rear of Sherman’s forces, he ordered Atlanta to be burned. Sherman’s engineer Captain O.M. Poe later wrote “For military purposes the city of Atlanta has ceased to exist.” With Atlanta left in ruins, Sherman and his 62,000 troops marched deeper into Georgia spread over a path nearly sixty miles wide.

As Sherman’s men marched they were instructed to “forage liberally” and foraging parties were organized under the command of “discreet officers.” The intent was to control the

20 McPherson, Tried by War, 251.
21 Ibid., 252.
25 Ibid., 116.
26 Ibid., 118.
men in such a way as to make the foraging strategic and effective while keeping the men in check. Food stores, livestock, and anything of military value were seized to provision the Union Army. Anything not needed or immediately used by the troops was burned or otherwise destroyed. Railroad lines were torn up, melted and tied around trees to form “Sherman’s neckties.”

Ten days into the march General Sherman’s personal secretary Major Henry Hitchcock wrote in his personal diary of the destruction, “But war is war, and a horrible necessity at best: yet when forced on us as this war is, there is no help but to make it so terrible that when peace comes it will last.”

It must be noted that overall, Sherman’s men behaved like soldiers. There was no gratuitous bloodshed on the march and fewer than half a dozen rapes were recorded. The troops were controlled and well behaved. One Confederate officer noted “The Federal army generally behaved very well in this State. I don’t think there was ever an army in the world that would have behaved better, on a similar expedition, in an enemy country. Our army certainly wouldn’t.”

On December 21, 1864, Sherman’s army concluded its march to the sea with the fall of Savannah. After marching triumphantly into Savannah, Sherman wired President Lincoln “I beg to present you, as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, and also about 25,000 bales of cotton.” An uplifted President Lincoln wrote that

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27 Carr, “General Sherman’s March to the Sea.”, 30.
29 Victor Davis Hanson, “Sherman’s War.” *American Heritage* 50, no. 7 (November 1999): 60.
30 Ibid., 60.
“Grant has the bear by the hind leg while Sherman takes off the hide.” In February 1865, Sherman turned his forces northward and began the march through the Carolinas continuing his effort to finally and fully destroy the South.

Sherman’s forces reached the outskirts of Columbia, South Carolina on February 15, 1865. It is debated whether or not the fires that burned Columbia were set intentionally by Union soldiers or sparked by retreating Confederate soldiers. Whether intentional or not, the burning of Columbia had the desired effect. Sherman later wrote, “Though I never ordered it and never wished it, I have never shed any tears over the event, because I believe that it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the War.” Word of Sherman’s burning of Columbia spread faster than the fires that consumed the city, and the city of Charleston, less than a hundred miles away, surrendered before Sherman could reach it. Sherman continued his push northward and into North Carolina. Once again, word of his impending approach preceded him and by the time he reached Fayetteville, North Carolina on March 11, 1865 the city had been abandoned by Confederate forces. The only notable Confederate resistance to Sherman’s advance through the Carolinas came from General Joseph E. Johnston on March 19, 1865 near Bentonville, North Carolina. The skirmish was short-lived and before Sherman could fully muster his troops, Johnston had retreated.

By the time Sherman ended in his march in Goldsboro, North Carolina, his troops had left behind them a devastated South that would never again be able to support an army. Georgia

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32 McPherson, Tried by War, 255.
35 Ibid., 11.
36 McPherson and Hogue, Ordeal by Fire, 512.
and the Carolinas were no longer in a position to provide food and support to the Confederate Army. For General Lee, the end seemed inevitable. He was being chased by General Grant and General Sherman had thoroughly destroyed his ability to provision an army. The Chief of Confederate Ordnance, Josiah Gorgas, wrote in his diary: “Where is this to end? No money in the Treasury, no food to feed Gen. Lee’s Army, no troops to oppose Gen. Sherman.” The South was finally broken.

The effectiveness of Sherman’s development and implementation of total war tactics cannot be overstated. It is difficult to quantify the damage done by Sherman and his army, but rough estimates place the dollar figure at well over $100,000,000 in Georgia alone. When Sherman reached Savannah he reported to Union commanders that “This may seem a hard species of warfare, but it brings the sad realities of war home to those who have been directly or indirectly instrumental in involving us in its attendant calamities.” Historian Victor Davis Hanson argues that if Sherman had not made his march through Georgia and the Carolinas the war would have been extended for at least another year and a negotiated peace would have been the most likely outcome. The strategy of total war developed and implemented by Sherman was an entirely new concept of warfare that most certainly ended the war in a Union victory. Waging not only a military, but a psychological war on the civilian population of the South completely decimated the ability of the Confederacy to continue the war. The tactics and strategies of total war developed by Sherman would become a cornerstone of American war strategy in future armed conflicts. By taking the war to and through the doorstep of the South’s

37 Phillips, “War Sherman Style.”, 11; and McPherson and Hogue, Ordeal by Fire, 512.
38 McPherson, Tried by War, 256.
39 Gray, “The March to the Sea.”, 133.
40 Hanson, “Sherman’s War.”, 63.
civilian population Sherman devastated the South’s economy, eliminated its ability to provision an army, and thoroughly crushed its will to continue the fight.

War is certainly hell and General Sherman made certain the entire South experienced the hell of war. As Sherman wrote to the Atlanta City Council, “War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it: and those who brought war on our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out.”\(^1\) Sherman was certainly true to his word as he and his army inflicted curses and maledictions on the civilian population of the South. General Sherman’s development and implementation of total war tactics decimated and demoralized the South which led to a decisive Union victory.

\(^1\) Sherman, “Message to the Atlanta City Council.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


