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On those all too rare occasions that the world has the opportunity to witness pure genius or someone of an outstanding nature work in his respective craft, the blessing often goes unheralded. However, in the case of William Tecumseh Sherman, humanity immediately understood and recognized the remarkable talent that he unveiled throughout the Civil War. Of the generals, only a few were more noteworthy and ingenious throughout the entire conflict, which prompted historian Richard McMurry to say that Sherman was "probably the most creative and intuitively brilliant of all the high-ranking Civil War generals."[1] Few generals were more groundbreaking than Sherman was, as he proceeded to utilize the practice of total warfare during his signature "March to the Sea" campaign. No general had previously used total warfare during the Civil War, and Sherman's employment of the technique brought both a resounding victory for the Union and lasting hatred from Southerners for the man who authorized its usage. Nevertheless, despite criticisms against his methods, Sherman most certainly epitomized the characteristics of a brilliant tactician, and because of his implementation of total warfare, the Civil War ended much sooner than it would have had Sherman decided to stay with conventional military techniques in his "March to the Sea" operation.

However, three preliminaries bear mentioning before examining Sherman and his use of total warfare. First, one must consider the important literature compiled on Sherman. Next, the author will provide an introduction to Sherman and his background, as both are important in understanding the psyche and mentality of the man who would become an innovator on the method of total warfare and the pioneer of the technique during the American Civil War. Finally, the author will include a summary of total warfare and its origins to help the reader understand how new to the time and revolutionary it was for Sherman to employ such methods. These three aspects will help the reader understand not only Sherman, but also why he would employ total warfare and the importance of his actions.

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On the subject of Sherman, much literature exists simply because of his importance as a general during the Civil War, and while less goes into depth on his usage of total warfare, many of the works are still quite useful and deserve mention. Liddell Hart's *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* is a critical piece of literature on the general that has received lavish reviews, such as the *Saturday Review* stating it was "[t]he best analysis of General Sherman that has appeared." Hart explores Sherman's many campaigns and goes into depth on "The March to the Sea," detailing its destruction and importance vividly. *Southern Storm: Sherman's March to the Sea* by Noah Trudeau is an exceptional piece that describes the damage caused by Sherman's capstone operation in Georgia through the diaries and journals of Union soldiers and Confederate civilians. Finally, Sherman himself illuminates the reader with his collection, *Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, a remarkably well written and engrossing compilation of his life, which is incredibly helpful in creating a picture of the man and his genius. Although historians have written countless other works on Sherman, these three are noteworthy and deserve to be mentioned, as they are pivotal in understanding his decision to utilize total warfare.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Sherman found himself having to fight for everything that he had at a young age. Forced to deal with the loss of his father at the age of nine, Sherman moved to live with his adoptive parents. Sherman said in his memoirs that his father's death "left the family very poor, but friends rose up with proffers of generous care and assistance."[2] Although he received a high quality education because of his foster parents, his life was not destined to become easy with his appointment to West Point. Hart describes the harshness of life at the academy as one that staunched creativity and individualism, characteristics that Sherman demonstrated throughout his life. Likening West Point to a prison and Sherman as to a wild animal from the wilderness of Ohio, Hart says "when he [Sherman] entered the gates of West Point the "animal" must have felt that, in truth, he was entering a cage, and its bars of customs and discipline were to be a sore restraint on body and spirit alike."[3] Although Sherman disliked the academy about as much as one could, he still managed to graduate high in his class, saying "My average demerits, per annum, were about one hundred and fifty, which reduced my class standing from number four to six."[4] Sherman mentioned two other important notes about his character that he discovered while at West Point. The first dealt with his drawbacks, which he recalled by stating that he was "not

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considered a good solider" as he did not possess any important virtues related to the military at that time, principal among them "neatness in dress and form, with a strict conformity to the rules."[5] Sherman realized at an early age that what was expected and deemed normal for military members was not necessarily the best and or right thing. Sherman then mentioned that he "always held a respectable reputation with the professors" and noted his skills in certain areas by saying that he "generally ranked among the best, especially in drawing, chemistry, mathematics, and natural philosophy."[6] Sherman recognized his attributes and was not afraid to let more trivial matters like uniforms and appearance detract from his ability to perform well as an officer. Later, Sherman fought for increased military and officer corps professionalization, more rigorous officer performance evaluation, and curbing political partisanship—progressive arguments ahead of his time, considering the amateurish nature of the officer corps.[7] These points from Sherman's youth illustrate factors that led to his becoming a fearless general— one who made controversial decisions impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands.

What exactly is total warfare? The short answer from *dictionary.com* describes total warfare as "a war in which every available weapon is used and the nation's full financial resources are devoted." The idea originated in the nineteenth century, when French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars mobilized mass populations and targeted many civilians who died during battle. Total war also broke out during the Taiping Rebellion, as belligerents on both sides waged war on civilians as well as used them in support roles during the conflict. However, the first deliberate appearance occurred during the American Civil War, as Sherman directed a total war campaign in his epic "March to the Sea." Many historians credit Carl von Clausewitz for writing on the subject of total war. Clausewitz posited that the growth of nationalistic armies in Europe raised the stakes in war to new heights (which proved out during World War I and World War II with trench warfare and the atomic bomb respectively). Clausewitz stated, "If one considers war as an act of mutual destruction, we must of necessity imagine both parties as making some progress."[8] Certainly this would not do as a strategy, so therefore the implementation of total warfare, a tactic that would ruin an opponent's ability to make war and encourage the enemy population to withdraw emotionally from the conflict, would be the next logical step.

Did Sherman immediately use this strategy at the outset of the Civil War in 1861? The answer to that is surprisingly no, as is the next statement: Sherman

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actually suffered several setbacks early in his military career. After serving well at the First Battle of Bull Run (receiving minor wounds, the first of many injuries during the war), Sherman seemed to be heading in the right direction with his promotion to brigadier general of volunteers.[9] However, as Sherman took over operations in Kentucky, he began to suffer from severe pessimism and nervousness, leading to a breakdown. Major General Henry W. Halleck ordered he take a leave of absence. Sherman experienced further defeats and losses throughout the course of the Civil War, as he was a great—but not perfect—general. Sherman suffered a loss at the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou, which prompted historian John Winters to say of Sherman "if he muffed his Vicksburg assignment, which had begun unfavorably, he would rise no higher."[10]

However, these setbacks were only temporary, and after the period of leave in 1861, Sherman came back to help Brigadier General Ulysses S.
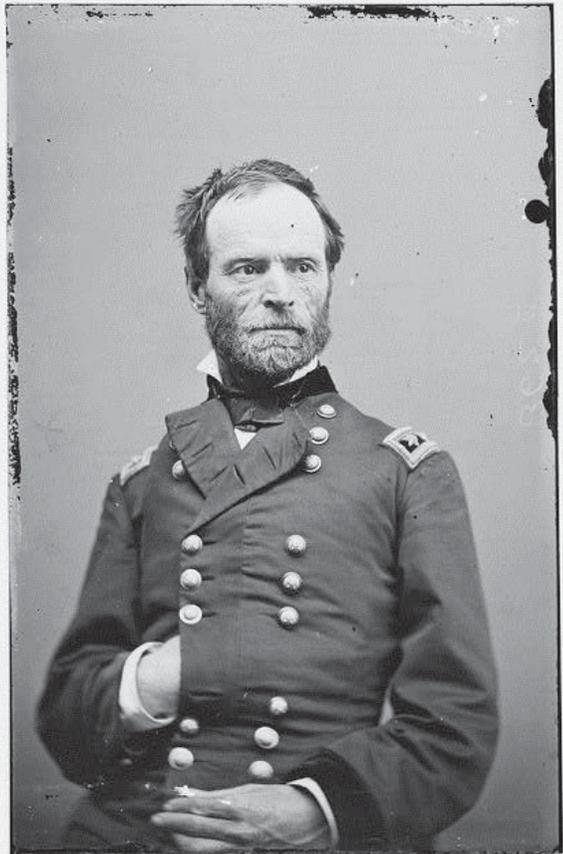
Figure 1 *William T. Sherman*. Negative, glass, wet collodion, c. 1860 –1870. Library of Congress.

Grant capture Fort Donelson, a move that would endear him to the future president and unite them for the entirety of the war. This relationship would grow stronger after the Battle of Shiloh, a massive battle that left thousands dead on both sides. Sherman's command received a major part of the Confederate attack, and despite giving ground, never retreated and due to Sherman's calm, helped the Union forces

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from falling into a devastating retreat. During the next day's fighting, the Union forces under Grant, Sherman, and other generals pushed the Confederates back in a battle that made sure the South "not only lost irreplaceable men but also failed to restore the balance of power in the middle and east Tennessee sub theater."[11] The excellent defensive measures Sherman displayed the first day and the well-executed counterattack the following day at Shiloh impressed Grant. While not total war tactics, they display Sherman's great generalship and provide an important stepping stone in building the relationship that would eventually allow Sherman to convince Grant and Lincoln that he should embark on his "March to the Sea" campaign.

After the first few years of the war had passed, Grant rewarded Sherman by naming him the overall commander in the Western theater, and tasking him with "bringing Bragg's army, now under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston, to battle."[12] Sherman did this by participating in the Battle of Chattanooga, and afterwards received command of all Union troops in the Western theater. Sherman then began to press Grant for permission to take the fight to Bragg and the heartland of the Confederacy by abandoning his supply line and living off the land in what would become his infamous "March to the Sea" campaign. This was of course a bold and almost reckless plan but also one that Grant understood was necessary, as coupled with General Sheridan's operations in the Shenandoah Valley it would aid in destroying the Confederacy's will to fight so that when Lee eventually surrendered in Virginia there would be no likelihood of a continued guerrilla war.[13] In the spring of 1864, Sherman received letters from Grant detailing that his plan would be approved, causing Sherman to say in a letter to his superior "That we are now all to act on a common plan, converging on a common centre, looks like enlightened war."[14]

The 'March to the Sea' could not happen until Sherman had captured Atlanta, however, which he accomplished after much maneuvering on September 2, 1864. The battle itself caused minimal damage to the city, but Sherman (in a move seen as a precursor to how he would treat the rest of the state and the future city of Columbus, South Carolina especially) ordered military and government buildings to be burned after giving civilians the opportunity to leave. Sherman knew a strategy like this was controversial, when he stated, "If the people raise a howl against my barbarity and cruelty, I will answer that war is war, and not popularity-seeking. If they want peace, they and their relatives must stop the

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war."[15] To complicate matters, many buildings not targeted by Sherman for destruction after he captured Atlanta burned due to the fires at the military buildings. While Sherman's actions in the destruction of Atlanta might be considered brutal and heartless, it was not necessarily a total war tactic, because

Figure 2 *Sherman's march to the sea*. Lithograph print by Felix Octavius Carr Darley, c 1883. Library of Congress.

he gave civilians the opportunity to leave and only targeted military buildings to be destroyed (even if many shops and homes burned accidentally).

      Sherman's famous quote of "I will make Georgia howl" left no doubt that he intended to cause as much damage as he could and that his strategy was one of total war during his next campaign of marching through the state and living off the land. Sherman's ultimate desire was to destroy the ability of the Confederacy to make war, either by crushing their farms, which fed the soldiers and funded the war, ruining the infrastructure in the Deep South, or by wiping out all morale and by bringing support for the war down to the point that average soldiers would desert. Rarely in history has an operation succeeded in achieving

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all of its goals, yet Sherman's "March to the Sea" did just that. To make matters worse for the Confederacy, the trek through Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah was a relatively easy one that only took Sherman and his army a month and a half, forcing them to suffer a negligible amount of casualties. Confederate cavalry left in Georgia under the command of Major General Joseph Wheeler did what they could to harass Sherman and his troops. They failed to inflict much damage; Sherman's cavalry was "more than sufficient to keep Wheeler's horsemen" at bay.[16] These few defenses were not enough to stop Sherman's torching of certain cities and towns during the trek through the state, as they completely destroyed the city of Millen due to the Confederate prisons that housed Union forces in inhospitable conditions.[17]

The path that Sherman and his troops cut through Georgia along what is now I-16 paled in comparison to the destruction visited on the state of South Carolina, most particularly the capital city of Columbia. Perceived by many as the state that initiated the Civil War, Sherman and his troops seemed to take extra care to lay waste to the areas that they traveled through, with the most damage done to Columbia, as they burned it to the ground on February 17, 1865. The troops under Sherman did have to fight their way through Confederate forces in South Carolina more so than in Georgia, as a division of 1,200 Confederate soldiers attempted to thwart Sherman's advance at the crossing of the Salkehatchie Swamp. Sherman's sweeping aside of this enemy forced Confederate General Joseph Johnston to say that "there had been no such army since the days of Julius Caesar."[18] Sherman had to persuade Grant to approve this campaign yet again (as Grant pushed for Sherman and his troops to board ships and travel north to rendezvous with his army to fight Lee). Sherman's army crossing into North Carolina where they met Union troops, finally culminated a four-month long trek from Atlanta to Goldsborough, North Carolina, that helped bring the end of the war that much closer for the Union. A resounding success, what began with the "March to the Sea" ended with two key Deep South states completely destroyed and useless to the Confederacy. More importantly to the annals of history, the operation placed Sherman in rare air as someone who perfected a strategy that would be implemented forever more destructive results in the twentieth century.

Not as damaging as the instances of total war in the twentieth century (such as the firebombing in Germany and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan during WWII), Sherman managed to inflict

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incredible amounts of damage to the Confederacy in his final campaign. Doing the opposite of what Grant was doing in Virginia (Grant's strategy focused on bleeding Lee's army to the point where he would no longer fight), Sherman's operations in Georgia and South Carolina resulted in relatively few Confederate soldiers killed since it aimed at destroying the infrastructure in the South that allowed them to stay in the fight. In Columbia alone, military buildings along with " the old state house, the Institution of the Sisters of Charity, a hotel, several churches and possibly 1,300 dwellings were burned."[19] Debate still rages over whether Sherman intended for the mass burning to take place or whether it was accidental or set by a few rogues, but regardless of the debate, the damage inflicted to the noncombatant structures occurred and the city was summarily out of the war for all intent and purposes. Sherman summed up the scene by uttering the phrase that his soldiers had "utterly ruined Columbia."[20]

Even if one were to take away the burning of Atlanta and Columbia, the destruction visited to the Confederacy was evident in two other pivotal areas already mentioned but deserve deeper investigation as they are prime results of the impact of total war: supplies and morale. The amount of weapons, foodstuffs, and all other various and sundry materiel Union troops took from warehouses, farms, and towns along the campaign made it impossible for the Confederacy to replace due to limited factories and broken infrastructure. They maimed so many railroads in the campaign, nicknamed "Sherman's neckties," which speaks magnitudes to the poor state of infrastructure in the Confederacy at the time. In the town of Cheraw, South Carolina alone, Harry Hansen writes that the Federals found "24 guns, 2,000 muskets, 3,600 barrels of gunpowder…and eight wagonloads of fine wines."[21] This type of taking from the poor (the Confederacy) and giving to the rich (the Union) effectively helped bring the war to an end even sooner, as it deprived the Confederacy of the necessary implements to make war and had the added effect of helping the enemy in the process. Even as the Confederacy was on its last legs, Sherman's forces ensured that even more damage would be inflicted as they destroyed the printing press in Columbia while using the Confederate money to spend and gamble "in the most lavish manner."[22]

All of these factors listed above, combined with the burning of the cities and the homeland of so many soldiers who were away fighting in other states served to ruin the morale of the Confederacy, which had already almost bottomed out by this point of the war. Sherman's march and his usage of total warfare

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destroyed the Southern will to fight more effectively than fighting many large-scale battles against the Confederate armies, because it forced the Southern men that were away fighting to worry about their families and homes even more than normal since they knew that Union forces were present in the area. According to Allan Millett and Peter Maslowski, Sherman "perceived that these raids also had a psychological impact, undermining the South's morale by demonstrating its incapacity for effective defense."[23] This statement could not have been more accurate, as it points out that Sherman knew what effects his operation would have on the Confederacy's morale, which is why he fought so hard to convince Grant and Lincoln to attempt it as opposed to a conventional style of war featuring large battles.

Only rarely do military leaders use the perfect strategy designed for the perfect general, as William Tecumseh Sherman exploited total war during the American Civil War. Raised through troubling times and maturing in the harsh walls of West Point, Sherman was a rugged man who was willing to do whatever it took to achieve victory for the Union. Throughout the war, his brilliance showed in key battles, and although he suffered some setbacks along the way, he was in prime position to take the war to the Confederacy in ways unimagined in 1864-1865. His infamous "March to the Sea" campaign destroyed Southern infrastructure, ruined their morale, and robbed them of any further chance and ability to continue the war. Nevertheless, Sherman knew that by implementing a strategy of total war that he would receive much disdain, but this did not affect him. Built for the type of conflict, his strong words to the Confederacy of "you cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will," were not full of just suggestions or bluster, but were words that he stuck to as he visited destruction to the Confederacy by perfecting the strategy of total war.[24]

Notes

1. Richard McMurry, *Two Great Rebel Armies: An Essay in Confederate Military History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 34.

2. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman,* Project Gutenberg, 7. http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=2779714&pageno=7.

3. Liddell Hart. *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 4.

4. Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American,* 5.

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5. Sherman, *Memoirs,* 9.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Allan Millett, "Military Professionalism and Officership in America" in David Skaggs and Robert S. Browning, eds. *In Defense of the Republic: Readings in American Military History* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 163.

8. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* in *The Prince, On War, The Art of War: Special Edition of Three All-time Classics on Politics & War* (Maryland: Arc Manor, 2007), 200.

9. Stanley Hirshson, *The White Tecumseh: A Biography of General William T. Sherman* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 40.

10. John Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 176.

11. Allan Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 187.

12. John W. Chambers II, ed. *The Oxford Guide: American Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 133.

13. Edward Eckert, "The McClellans and the Grants," in *In Defense of the Republic: Readings in American Military History* by David Skaggs and Robert Browning, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 135.

14. Sherman, *Memoirs,* 297.

15. Ibid., 350.

16. Steven E. Woodworth, *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 318.

17. Ibid., 318-319.

18. Ibid., 334.

19. Harry Hansen, *The Civil War: A History* (New York: Signet Classics, 2002), 585.

20. Ibid., 568.

21. Ibid., 587.

22. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 478.

23. Millett & Maslowski, *For the Common Defense,* 172.

24. Woodworth, *The Great Struggle,* 314.

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