

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The March to the Sea

By **Paul G. Ashdown & Edward Caudill**

William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea devastated the South, as Sherman pruned the Old-South myth of magnolia splendor to a stump. He humiliated Southerners and became a scapegoat of Southern wrath, the one to blame for what became of the Confederacy - from Reconstruction's failures, a regional malaise in an era of progress, to the simplistic stereotypes of lynch mobs and Klansmen, sharecropper shacks built on plantation ashes. In myth and folklore, the general personally was accused of torching buildings, even entire cities, stealing horses (white ones were favored), and plundering households.¹

The March meant new and evolving rules of war, engaging the civilian population that supported an enemy army, and subordinating any chivalric ideals of war to the goal of winning the conflict. This meant war was not army vs. army but army vs. society, its values as well as its soldiers. The Old South was a region of sharp stratification, the wealth of seignorial aristocracy, the slaveholders, whose legitimacy was contrived in undocumented claims of Old World heritage. Industrialism threatened to make such an agrarian economy an extension of the factory, identified with the rude, dirty cities of 19th-century America. The plantation could not be Edenesque in such a world, and its success would be measured not against a mythic garden, but a production line. In *The Destructive War*, Charles Royster insightfully saw at work in Sherman and his tactics an empirical mindset, which treated war as a "mechanical routine" in a campaign that "had the inevitability of design supported by science." With Sherman, The March was more an industrial argument against the agrarian Confederacy than a moral imperative to restore the Union, according to Royster.²

After the war, Southerners accused Sherman of violating the rules of civilized conflict, burning his way across Georgia and the Carolinas, pillaging homes and bringing war to the civilian population. He had promised to make Georgia howl, and he did.

¹ Lee B. Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians during Sherman's Campaign* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 321-322.

² Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 329, 227, 354-355.

Afterward, he said he taught people that war is all hell. The South never forgave him for the lesson. But the accusations that damned him in the eyes of the romantically afflicted Dixie alerted the North to a new kind of hero, a modern one who waged battle ruthlessly, efficiently, without sentiment. His conduct of war was remembered as the precursor to a well-managed factory, a symbol of progress in Gilded-Age America. What the South abhorred in Sherman, the North praised. Sherman became a symbol of the absoluteness of the Southern defeat. General Ulysses S. (Hiram Ulysses) Grant killed far more men, but he did so in the tradition of soldier vs. soldier. Even though Sherman killed comparatively few people, he made the South afraid, a self-revelation for Southerners that must have made him doubly contemptible in a culture of self-proclaimed cavalier bravado. Worse yet, he did not sentimentalize war. He simply conducted it.

He made defeat for the South akin to being beaten by a corporate magnate good at reading balance sheets but indifferent to glory and legacy. The South had in Sherman its anti-hero, an individualistic Yankee soldier who outsmarted some of the South's best, as he denuded numerous myths at the center of the Old-South fantasy, including the superiority of the Southern warrior, the romantic ideal of war, and the contented slave. Worse yet, the destroyer was the very personification of the Yankee and common man. Rumped in appearance, coarse in language, Sherman was as un-cavalier as a soldier could be. His habit of living rough and his casual attitude toward dress endeared him to his own troops, but to Southerners these traits were just further proof that he was an uncouth barbarian. Under the umbrella of progress and modernism, the North had in Sherman the modern hero. The backward-looking South – of an idealized agrarian culture – had the model of a modern villain. Grant only defeated an army. Sherman killed a culture. No other Northern general, not even Grant, came to be so consistently held in such infamy in the Southern mind.³

Atlanta

In April 1864, Grant ordered Sherman to pursue General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, who was entrenched with 50,000 troops near Dalton, Georgia. At Tunnel Hill, Georgia, Sherman and his staff planned the campaign against Johnston. Sherman wrote in his *Memoirs* that he had begun to convert his army into a “mobile machine,” dispensing with such things as wall tents and keeping the “mess establishment . . . less in bulk than that of any of the brigade commanders.” He wanted to set an example, have his troops prepared to move out at a moment's notice and subsist on a minimum of rations. Meanwhile, he studied U.S. census tables for Georgia and statistics from the state controller, studying population and statistics for every county. Sherman left for Chattanooga on May 7 to begin the Atlanta campaign with 100,000 troops. He had under

³ Marion B. Lucas, “William Tecumseh Sherman v. the Historians,” *Proteus*, 17:2 (2000), 15; Robert K. Murray, “General Sherman, The Negro, and Slavery: The Story of an Unrecognized Rebel,” *The Negro History Bulletin* 22 (March 1959), 125.

his command the Army of the Tennessee, led by Major General James Birdseye McPherson; the Army of the Cumberland, under Major General George Henry Thomas; and the Army of the Ohio, under Brigadier General John McAllister Schofield.⁴ Atlanta was important for both military and political reasons. It was an industrial center, with warehouses of provisions and materiel, and an important rail center. The city was politically significant because its capture before the November elections would boost Lincoln's re-election chances. Biographer Lloyd Lewis said Confederates exploited the political aspect of the campaign. Johnston refused to directly confront Sherman as the latter moved South in an attempt to drag out the campaign beyond November, thereby fueling Lincoln's opposition.⁵

The Atlanta campaign became a series of flanking maneuvers, which kept Johnston in retreat. At Dalton, Johnston held the high ground, an 800-foot-high ridge, as well as several gaps through which the Western & Atlantic Railroad ran. Sherman knew that a direct assault on the positions would be doomed, so on May 8 he sent McPherson west of Dalton and around Johnston. Meanwhile, Schofield and Thomas would feint against the front and left of Johnston's positions. A surprised Johnston withdrew to Resaca, about 18 miles south, where he dug in again. After several bloody assaults on May 14 and 15, Johnston found rail lines to his rear being threatened, putting him in danger of being flanked again. He withdrew to Cassville, and within a few days found himself retreating again after Union forces slipped behind Lieutenant General John Bell Hood, and forced the Confederates to the Etowah River. Hood and Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk told Johnston that Union artillery were threatening part of the Confederate line dug in at Cassville, so Johnston pulled back again, this time to Allatoona Pass, only 30 miles from Atlanta.⁶

Sherman began another flanking movement designed to force Johnston out of Allatoona Pass, which protected Atlanta. Sherman planned to move against Dallas between Allatoona and the Etowah River over steep, woody terrain, blocked with thickets of dense underbrush. Creeks and quicksand became bogs when heavy rains started on May 25. Johnston figured out Sherman's plans, moved to block him, and three days of heavy fighting ensued at New Hope Church, just outside Dallas. Sherman lost about 1,600 men at Pickett's Mill, as he tried again to flank the Confederates and inflicted only about 500 casualties on the Confederates. With the incessant pressure, Johnston kept moving, and Sherman reached the railroad south of Allatoona Pass.⁷

⁴ William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, (New York: Library of America, 1984, originally published 1875), 467-468, 472-473, 495-496.

⁵ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 336.

⁶ John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 264-270; Sherman, 496-518, 531-523.

⁷ *Ibid*, 264-270; Sherman, 525-542.

Meanwhile, in Sherman's front, Johnston had fallen back by mid-June toward Kennesaw Mountain, near Marietta. Sherman was familiar with the area from his travels in 1840, and he knew the 700-foot mountain would be a formidable defensive position. In addition to the natural advantage, Johnston's army had built a series of earthen and log embankments, had bent saplings forward and cut them to sharpened points. In his initial assessments of the situation, Sherman dismissed any assault on such a position. Such defenses, he knew, meant heavy losses. As he re-evaluated the situation, however, Sherman began to reconsider the frontal assault, but in conjunction with flanking maneuvers. His intent was to drive through the Confederate lines in two places and push toward the railroad in Marietta, isolating the Confederate forces in three sections. Sherman ordered the attack on June 27. McPherson attacked Johnston's right-center, while Schofield made demonstrations on the left. Then the frontal assault commenced. Sherman knew it could be costly, but he figured it would be less so than attempting to move around Johnston. The attacks failed dismally, with Sherman losing about 2,500 men to the Confederate losses of 800. Schofield had managed to get several brigades in Johnston's rear, however. Sherman went back to his flanking tactics. On July 1 and 2, he sent McPherson behind Thomas and Schofield to threaten Johnston's rear. The Confederate saw little choice but to withdraw again, and on July 9 retreated to Atlanta.⁸

At this point, Sherman issued an order that became symbolic of either the barbarism to come or of the "modern" conception of war, one waged against all of society and not just its military. Just what it symbolized depended on one's sympathies. After Johnston's retreat across the Chattahoochee River and into Atlanta, Union forces destroyed mills north and west of the river. The mills included those in Roswell Factory (now Roswell), which employed hundreds of women. Sherman concluded that, since the factories had been working for the Confederate government for a number of years in supplying military goods, the women employees were "as much governed by the rules of war as if in the ranks." They were, in the general's estimation, as traitorous as the men who governed and fought for the Confederacy. He ordered about 400 women deported by rail to Indiana, where he figured they could be dispersed to again find employment, but not for the benefit of the Confederacy.⁹ Newspapers in Tennessee, New York, Indiana and Kentucky reported harsh treatment of the women, some deeming them "destitute," their condition "deplorable." For those who later desired it to be, the action portended things to come – destruction, cruelty and barbarity. In reality, there is no evidence of mistreatment of the women, although their plight was real enough.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, 271-274; Sherman, 520, 525-540.

⁹ Hartwell T. Bynum, "Sherman's Expulsion of the Roswell Women in 1864," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 54 (1970), 169-181.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Johnston's consistent retreating, however justified militarily, provided the excuse that President Jefferson Davis needed to replace him. Their relationship had been an uneasy one for some time. On July 17, Davis named Hood the new corps commander. When Sherman read of the action in an Atlanta newspaper, he asked Schofield, who had attended West Point with Hood, what to expect of Hood. He was, Schofield said, extremely courageous, but to a degree that took him to "rashness." He told Sherman to expect an attack. A few days later, Hood ordered assaults on the Army of the Cumberland and the Army of the Tennessee. Though both attacks were repulsed, Sherman suffered a serious loss when McPherson was killed on July 22. Sherman named Major General Oliver Otis Howard to replace McPherson, and directed Howard to cut the rail line from Macon to Atlanta. But supply lines were not cut, so Confederates barricaded themselves in the city. With an open line of fire to the city, Sherman settled in for the quasi-siege. Military targets were scattered about Atlanta, so the bombardment of the city inevitably and unintentionally found civilian targets, too. Meanwhile, Sherman extended his trench lines as he tried to completely surround the city and cut Confederate supply lines.¹¹

Nearly encircled, Hood had little choice but to pull out of the city, which he did on Sept. 2. Sherman's army entered the city that same day, but he personally took his time, getting there five days later, almost as if to say "so what?" to the accomplishment, and that he didn't need a conqueror's march at the head of the troops. When he did arrive, he ordered the expulsion of the whole population within five days. The Southern press was aghast, the Northern press attentive, but any criticism was muted by the accomplishment of taking the city. The move had precedent. Sheridan had laid waste to the Shenandoah Valley; Sherman's foster brother, Brigadier General Thomas Ewing Jr., had banished about 20,000 people from several Missouri counties; and Sherman had in the previous year expelled the people of Iuka, Mississippi, for sniping on Union boats. But Atlanta was bigger, more important, and in the heart of the South.¹²

Atlanta officials protested to Sherman, citing the consequences for the women, children and elderly. Though Sherman was sympathetic, he dismissed the protest because, he said, "The use of Atlanta for warlike purposes is inconsistent with its character as a home for families. . . . War is cruelty and you cannot refine it." Here was Sherman the realist, scolding Southerners for their genteel concept of war. Hood, too, objected, writing Sherman that the order "transcends, in studious and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war." Sherman countered that Confederates had started the war, and were responsible for the consequences. The correspondence with Hood and the mayor of Atlanta on the morality of expelling civilians was reprinted widely in the North, where Sherman was praised for his action. Atlanta was not "cleaned out," as Sherman wrote Lincoln, and it is not

¹¹ Sherman, 548-559.

¹² Lee B. Kennett, *Sherman: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 252; Sherman, 582-584.

possible to know exactly how many people were sent out of the city. Kennett estimated that perhaps 3,500 people were evacuated, while many prominent citizens remained, along with blacks, and some whites working for the Federal occupiers, as well as a few Unionists.¹³

Once the Union forces held Atlanta, the supply problem loomed again. The rail line from Chattanooga was under constant assault, if not by Hood then by guerrillas. Hood broke the line in early October before heading westward to Alabama. Defending the line was cumbersome and costly in terms of manpower, and holding the city tied up a large number of Union troops. Sherman and Grant had been discussing a march on either Savannah or Macon. With the Vicksburg triumph, the South was divided at the Mississippi River. An eastward march would cut the Confederacy again, and slicing it along the Atlanta-Milledgeville-Savannah rail line would seriously impair supplies to Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Sherman was well aware of the psychological benefits if such a plan succeeded.¹⁴

Sherman's proposed expedition had two major risks: ammunition and weather. Should the Confederacy decide to challenge the march with a large force, Sherman would have difficulty providing sufficient ammunition, given that his forces needed to travel light and fast. Since they were starting in November, weather could turn roads into mud, which would not only slow the march but could starve the army if it failed to keep moving into new foraging territory. Add to that the discomfort of cold weather for men traveling with little more than a bedroll and the clothes they wore.

Stories have grown up about Sherman's destruction of Atlanta as he left the city. Although it is not possible to know with certainty what damage Sherman inflicted, it is clear that the Confederates share some of the blame. Hood had destroyed a number of buildings, including ammunition depots, as he left the city in September. Sherman did order the destruction of factories, depots and any other facilities that would be of use to the Confederates. In at least one case, a hidden ammunition depot ignited in a machine shop that was being destroyed, sending sparks through the night of November 15, and resulting in a number of houses burning. But the general did not burn the entire city. Some of the looting was at the hand of Atlanta's own.¹⁵

The March to the Sea

On November 16, Sherman left Atlanta with 62,000 of his best troops, those selected for a tough, physical campaign, and from which Sherman culled those he deemed "sick, wounded and worthless." Thomas was sent north to block Hood, who had

¹³ Kennett, *Sherman*, 210-211; Marszalek, 285; Sherman, 585-604, 649-655.

¹⁴ Kennett, *Marching*, 226-227; Sherman, 614-615, 621, 627-628, 640-641.

¹⁵ Sherman, 649-655.

departed Georgia to attack Tennessee and Kentucky. The Union troops were in high spirits as they left Atlanta, jubilant in triumph, though the soldiers did wonder about their destination. They destroyed the rail line behind them, which also must have caused some concern because they were, in effect, wrecking their own supply line. They were not even burdened by tents. Each man carried only a blanket, a shirt and spare socks, a few cooking utensils, a ration of coffee, sugar, salt and hard tack, and his gun with 40 rounds of ammunition. The general split his command into two wings, Howard's Army of the Tennessee on the right, and Major General Henry Warner Slocum's newly designated Army of Georgia on the left. Brigadier General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick's cavalry would go where needed, protecting flanks, skirmishing with guerillas, and scouting. Sherman's historic field order no. 120 informed his command that it would "forage liberally on the country" in order to feed itself. Foragers were ordered to refrain from "abusive or threatening language," and to leave a written receipt with those from whom they took food. Troops were not to enter houses and were to leave some food with the family for its own sustenance. Destruction of any structure, including houses, was only to be done under order of corps commanders.¹⁶

The character of the March to the Sea was evident fairly quickly. Sherman's troops not only "foraged liberally," a term they interpreted liberally, but they also began the destruction of the infrastructure, including railroads and factories. Sherman's "bummers," the troops assigned to scavenging the countryside for sustenance, became legendary in their ability to find hidden food and loot, whether it was buried or stashed in nearby swamps or woods. They were the very personification of Yankee villainy in the eyes of Georgians. The fighting was skirmishes and ambushes, mostly by Confederate cavalry and state militia, which were by now young boys and old men. Even the names of some of the local defenders sounded like theatrical mockery of Southern martial spirit, given the aged, ill-equipped men who made up the ranks: the Mitchell Thunderbolts, or the Paulding County Raid-Repellers. The opposition was inevitably too small to threaten the main force but always harassing the foragers or a column's stragglers. In addition, a large and growing contingent of former slaves fell in step behind Sherman's columns. Some were taken on as laborers, cooks and teamsters. But for the most part Sherman saw them as a nuisance, a small army of refugees that needed food and care, and which could only slow his advance.¹⁷

Looting occurred, but fell out of fashion as troops discovered that anything they stole much larger than a silver spoon would soon become a burden, so candelabras, clocks and paintings often were quickly discarded along the road. They took not only foodstuffs, but livestock, oftentimes killing what they did not consume or need in order to undermine any support for the enemy and to further crush morale. They replaced worn out horses and mules with fresh ones plucked along the way. Though Sherman had ordered soldiers to "forage liberally," he did not approve of out-and-out plunder. But he

¹⁶ Kennett, *Sherman*, 262-264; Kennett, *Marching*, 242-243; Sherman, 660-661.

¹⁷ Kennett, *Marching*, 247; Sherman, 657-658.

also did not treat plunderers severely, if at all, even when he saw soldiers marching along, burdened with far more foodstuffs than would be consumed in the near future. They were fighting not just Southern soldiers, but also the civilians, in order to demoralize them and to make more evident the fact that their traitorous government could not protect them. Of course, the civilians were not innocents in Sherman's eyes. They supported the rebellion, and so were responsible for it. Sherman knew of excesses and noted in his *Memoirs* that "pillage, robbery, and violence, were committed," and he heard of jewelry and other items being plundered. "(B)ut these acts were exceptional and incidental. I never heard of any of murder or rape. . . ." Historical records of such things are scant, especially when such depredations were committed by stragglers and irregular units. Undoubtedly, some homes were ransacked and destroyed, some civilians assaulted, some atrocities committed. But such things were comparatively rare, given the size of the force sweeping through the countryside and the conditions under which it was operating.¹⁸ Stories circulated, probably embellished in the telling and re-telling, and eventually feeding the myth of the monster Sherman.

In his *Memoirs*, Sherman described how foragers were dispatched before daylight, given the route of the day's march, and how they would range on foot five or six miles from the main columns. He noted that a certain amount of risk went with the task, but "there seemed to be a charm about it that attracted the soldiers, and it was a privilege to be detailed on such a party." Sherman's own attitude toward excesses in foraging is illustrated in an anecdote that he recounted in his *Memoirs*:

It was at this very plantation that a soldier passed me with a ham on his musket, a jug of sorghum-molasses under his arm, and big piece of honey in his hand, from which he was eating, and, catching my eye, he remarked sotto voce and carelessly to a comrade, "Forage liberally on the country," quoting from my general orders. On this occasion, as on many others that fell under my personal observation, I reproved the man, explained that foraging must be limited to the regular parties properly detailed, and that all provisions thus obtained must be delivered to the regular commissaries, to be fairly distributed to the men who kept their ranks.¹⁹

The general made no mention of having the man turn the plunder over to anyone else, and nothing more severe than the reproof. It apparently was a rather common sight, one that did not cause Sherman much consternation.

The two wings moved rapidly, at 10 to 15 miles per day, from 20 to 60 miles apart, a distance that would provide plenty of countryside from which to supply the troops. The general traveled with the left wing of his army, which feinted toward Augusta, while the right wing threatened Macon. The paucity of the Confederate resistance was exemplified by three brigades defending Griswoldsville, a village just

¹⁸ Lewis, 452-54; Sherman, 658-660.

¹⁹ Sherman, 658-659.

outside the state capital of Milledgeville. On November 22, about 2,000 militiamen charged about 1,500 men of Sherman's XV Corps. The heroic Georgians were routed. After an afternoon of fighting, the militiamen left the field to the Union forces. Nearly a third of the Confederates remained on the battlefield, and the Yankees – veterans who had seen the blood and carnage of battle – were appalled by what they saw once the firing ceased and they ventured out. An Illinois officer recorded in his diary, "I was never so affected at the sight of wounded and dead before. Old grey-haired and weakly looking men and little boys, not over fifteen years old, lay dead or writhing in pain."²⁰ Though such comments would later add fuel to the myth – whether Sherman's unstoppable power or his unfathomable cruelty – it should be remembered that Hood elected to quit Georgia, leaving in many cases a militia that could hardly be expected to defeat seasoned troops. But Union soldiers, whatever the weaknesses of their adversaries, had to defend themselves even if against children and old men, who were capable of killing the invaders.

A day later, the two wings converged on Milledgeville, which was undefended. Union troops destroyed various materiel, including gunpowder and ammunition, about a thousand cotton bales, and divided up about 1,500 pounds of tobacco. Legislators and the governor had fled, after the latter issued a proclamation calling into service all Georgia males age 16 to 55. Sherman's troops took it upon themselves to hold a legislative session, one lubricated by liquor, in which they mocked the bravado of the lawmakers with fiery rhetoric, and showed theatrical terror upon notification of the Yankee's approach. They also voted for Georgia to rejoin the Union. But Sherman was not one to dally. On the morning of November 24, the general departed, but not before summoning one of the local doctors. Sherman asked a favor, which was that he give the governor, when he returned, the gift of a barrel of whiskey that Sherman's men had unearthed. He also asked the doctor to take care of 28 Union soldiers who were too ill to march. If they died, Sherman asked that they be buried. If they lived, he said, they should be treated as prisoners of war.²¹

Griswoldsville would be the only real battle, though a limited one, of the campaign. More characteristic of the fighting that would ensue was that involving each side's cavalry, led by Kilpatrick and by Confederate Lieutenant General Joseph Wheeler. The Confederate cavalry was too small to risk a major engagement, and so was limited to a campaign of harassment all the way to Savannah. The drawn-out skirmish between Kilpatrick and Wheeler also revealed a dark side to war. When the Confederates caught a foraging party in action, the Union soldiers often were killed, their bodies left unburied as a sort of warning. Such action provoked Kilpatrick's men in turn. The generals

²⁰ Kennett, *Marching*, 254-255; Sherman, 663-664; Charles Wright Mills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier, Including a Day by Day Record of Sherman's March to the Sea* (Washington, D.C.: Globe Printing, 1906), 324.

²¹ Kennett, *Marching*, 257-262; Sherman, 666-667.

corresponded, each charging the other with atrocities. In one instance, Kilpatrick informed Sherman of finding bodies of Union soldiers with their throats slit and rope burns on their necks. Sherman responded that when such acts occurred, Kilpatrick “may hang and mutilate man for man without regard to rank.”²²

Sherman marched. His foragers roamed. Their stated job was to find food for the troops and forage for livestock. But given the size and rapidity of the March, it would have been difficult in any circumstances to know how much to take and which territory for any given contingent to cover. As it was, several forage parties might descend on a farm over the course of several days, and those parties might range in size from only two or three to as many 20. And they were wasteful of the forage, often killing livestock in order to deprive the Confederates of it, or taking only choice cuts if they were already loaded with food. They took far more horses and mules than they needed to replenish those used in the March. Those not used were shot. Confederate cavalry at times found up 150 mules and horses shot by the roadside. Even some of the infantry found fine mounts for themselves. The excess of mounts also meant the foragers could travel even faster across the countryside, so much so that Kilpatrick found himself in competition with the “bummers” for forage, which annoyed the general. The zealous foragers were no doubt wasteful and inefficient, but it was an issue that seemed of little concern to their commander, who in his *Memoirs* refers to the “skill and success” of his foragers.²³ They were, after all, contributing to Union success by proving the vulnerability of the very heart of the South, and its government’s inability to defend its citizens, even from small bands of Union soldiers.

Words like barbed wire

Though the foraging was excessive, another excess for which the general has been credited is unjustified, and that is the use of fire, of literally burning his way across Georgia. In Special Field Order No. 127, Sherman stated that if the enemy were to burn corn and forage on the route of the March, then “houses, barns, and cotton gins must also be burned to keep them company.” It was a standing order that if troops were fired on from a building, then it would be torched. If a bridge were burned to impede the march, then the house of the person who did the burning would be burned. The folklore has Sherman burning thousands of houses, leaving “Sherman’s sentinels,” the brick chimneys, standing across the countryside. But most houses were left standing, according to a number of recent historical studies. Marion Lucas acknowledged that the Southern view of Sherman as a barbarian has been the most enduring one, but questions whether “total war” was ever an appropriate label for the Civil War, let alone for Sherman’s March. Lucas points out that the presumed excesses of the March may have been due in part to Sherman’s excesses with language, rather than actual deeds: “(H)e carried a big stick and spoke loudly. . . . Words spewed from Sherman’s mouth like

²² Kennett, *Marching*, 264; Lewis, 448.

²³ Kennett, *Marching*, 269-273; Sherman, 658.

barbed wire. . . .” Likewise, according to Kennett, there is no evidence of any more personal crimes - rapes and murders - than in earlier campaigns. In fact, the Southerners’ own, Wheeler’s cavalry, came to be seen by some Georgians as more destructive than Sherman’s foragers.²⁴

Any reservations the troops may have had about foraging liberally or any inclination to tread lightly across Georgia also were alleviated by what they saw of Union prisoners of war. At Millen, Georgia, Sherman’s troops found a stockade, without shelter or water, that held 300 Union prisoners. They also found 700 unmarked graves. Escapees from Andersonville confirmed the terror of the Confederate prison camps. The Union soldiers would have found the starvation even more damnable in the middle of such a wealthy countryside.

Because of the speed of the March and the general lack of communications lines, including access to both rail and telegraph lines, news about the expedition dried up. Sherman’s antipathy to reporters probably contributed also, since he was not inclined to be very accommodating to correspondents. In the North, people were left to speculate, and even Lincoln was at a loss for information when Senator John Sherman inquired as to the whereabouts of his brother. Lincoln replied, “Oh, no, we have heard nothing from him. We know what hole he went in, but we don’t know what hole he will come out of.” The lack of information may have served to only enhance the drama and excitement of the March. Sherman and news of his March finally did arrive when he appeared at the outskirts of Savannah on December 10.²⁵

The capture of Savannah was a fairly brief and bloodless affair. On December 13, Union forces took Fort McAllister in a brief engagement with few casualties. Its fall opened up a supply line to the ocean, where Union vessels were waiting. Lieutenant General William Joseph Hardee still defended the city with about 9,000 men, no match for Sherman’s forces. The Confederate general on December 17 refused Sherman’s surrender demand, and then four days later slipped out and into South Carolina on the only remaining escape route. Sherman moved into the city and sent the memorable telegram to Lincoln, offering the city as a Christmas present.

On February 1, 1865, Sherman began the march northward through the Carolinas. In the cradle of secession, the mood of the troops changed, and the destruction was more severe than it had been in Georgia. Sherman’s forces entered Columbia on February 17, and much of the city was destroyed by fire and looting that night. Southerners blamed Sherman. Sherman blamed the Confederate commander who he said carelessly put cotton bales in the streets. Whoever was at fault, Sherman did not apologize. He resumed the march, and on April 26, outside Durham, N.C., received General Joseph

²⁴ Kennett, *Marching*, 275-278; Lucas, 15-21.

²⁵ Lewis, 457-458; Marszalek, 306.

Johnston's surrender.²⁶ The Carolinas campaign was in many respects a different campaign, with different military and political objectives.

The March to the Sea and Its Myths

While the grinding war meant death and deprivation for many, it was an awakening to a new reality for others, even in terms of their faith. Private John Brobst was an infantryman during the March. His letters home did not show him to be an especially religious man, but he was familiar with Bible stories. He apparently believed in a just God, but revealed himself to be a free-spirited thinker about applying scriptural lessons:

“Sherman is our guide, like Moses of old was guide for the children of Israel, but he did not smote the waters of the Cattahoocha river as Moses did the red sea, but we had to wade, swim or roll through it. . . . In place of smoting the rock for water, he smotes the seller doors, and the wine, brandy, gin, and whiskey flows in the place of water. Sherman is rather ahead of Moses if he gets us through the wilderness all rite, I think.”²⁷

The entry illustrates the diametric opposition of cultural myths because the wilderness to which he refers, the South, saw itself as the citadel of civilization and culture, and saw Sherman as chief barbarian. In other circumstances, Northern orators even spoke of Sherman as having gone through the South “like the plow of God.”²⁸ But even into the next century, some Southerners insisted it was they who inhabited Eden, threatened not by God's plow but Attila's sword. Sherman cut through the South's heart. If that were not bad enough, Sherman shamed the South not by vanquishing it in slaughter, an accusation leveled against Grant, but by winning with a minimum of bloodshed. So the South could not even celebrate a “heroic” demise, and instead simply crumbled before Sherman. Thief, perhaps, but not executioner.

The myths of the March endure despite the fact that the South of the 21st century is not the rural, agrarian South of late 19th and early 20th centuries. North and South drew on the same mythic traditions to create different Marches, different Shermans. The general was complex, his life and actions conducive to a complex myth, one adaptable to numerous American myths, such as the frontier, science-technology as progress, individualism, the garden. There was something of an everyman in the adult Sherman, his rumpled appearance, his plain speech, his soldiers calling him “Uncle Billy.” His individualism came to be celebrated, particularly in the North, where his quirks of

²⁶ Lewis, 504-507; Marion B. Lucas, *Sherman and the Burning of Columbia* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1976), 163-167.

²⁷ A. Reed Taylor, “The War History of Two Soldiers: A Two-Sided View of the Civil War,” *Alabama Review*, 23:2 (April 1970), 103.

²⁸ Lewis, 619.

character, such as wandering about camp in his long johns at night, became charming eccentricities. Southern myth did not make such adaptations, which would not have served its memory. Instead, it retained the madman the Northern press discovered early in the war. He never became eccentric, and the nature of the March and its success was evidence that a very calculating madman had been in the culture's midst. Thus, the South could retain some dignity in defeat by attributing the loss, in part, to its own superiority. And the North was able to celebrate a unique event and individual. In American myth, there seems never to have been a strong challenge to the idea that the earthly garden was in America, only to where it might be, and how it might be manifest, whether in a wilderness, utopian communities, or idyllic farms and small towns. Wherever one found it, there was a place for Sherman, who could be the uncivilized invader or the cultivator pruning diseased branches. The same traits made him both a tactical genius and a barbarian. His conduct of war was humane because he attacked property rather than people, a tactic others deemed terrorism. His industrial efficiency in "hard war" was heroic in the North, villainous in the South.

War is still Hell

"Hero or terrorist? Leader or butcher?" the History Channel asked in the opening to its April 2007 program on Sherman and the March. In the first 15 minutes of the show, the audience learned that this "father of total war," who remains "controversial to this day," would "ravage the South." Before the first commercial break, viewers also heard that Sherman's proposed march from Atlanta would put 60,000 men "at risk." Lincoln was nervous. Grant had doubts. Sherman was sure. The opening artfully sketched an innovative military genius, and set up a story of fall and redemption (from alleged insanity back to command), a martial spirit dedicated to nation and a just cause. His appeal – the show's appeal – was confirmed with its first two commercials: Sam Adams beer and Maxiderm, a "male enhancement" drug. American legend. American revolutionary. American male. Legends and myths, like beer and prescriptions, are packaged for consumption. The show went on to provide an overview and assessment of Sherman's March and the Carolinas campaign, stressing its accomplishments. It also noted the less-than-admirable facts of Sherman and the March, especially treatment of newly freed slaves at Ebenezer Creek, and the killing of a Confederate prisoner of war in retaliation for the Confederate execution of Union cavalymen. For the South, historian Steven Woodworth tells us, Sherman had become the "new Attila the Hun." Such status would make Sherman an extremely important figure in inventing a memory of magnolias and knights – because he was neither. He was the villain in the memory, a corrosive agent in mythology's armor.²⁹

²⁹ Steven E. Woodworth, "West versus East," *America's Civil War* 20:5 (November 2007), 28-37.