

# 150 years since Sherman's March to the Sea

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27 November 2014

On November 15, 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman led a 60,000 soldier Union army from the recently captured city of Atlanta deep through the heart of the state of Georgia, resulting in the seizure of the port city of Savannah on December 21. In the March to the Sea, as the campaign became known, the Union army fed itself off the land, destroyed infrastructure and liberated tens of thousands of slaves, in the process delivering a deathblow to the slaveholders' rebellion. The American Civil War would be over within four months.

Sherman had been promoted to command of the Union armies of the West, known as the Army of Tennessee, after Abraham Lincoln brought Ulysses S. Grant, Sherman's friend and military co-thinker, to the eastern theater and command of all Union armies.

Sherman's capture of Atlanta in early September, 1864 had come at a crucial moment for the war-weary Union. In the same days the Democratic Party held its national convention in Chicago, where it denounced Lincoln for "four years of failure" and promised peace with the South and the perpetuation of slavery if its nominee, General George McClellan—whom Lincoln had cashiered in 1862—prevailed in the November elections. Sherman's victory helped turn an expected Lincoln defeat into one of the most lopsided electoral wins in American history.

Immediately afterward, in the fall of 1864, Sherman proposed a bold strategy. He told Lincoln and Grant that he should march his army from Atlanta to the Atlantic Coast, leaving behind his supply lines in Tennessee. The army would take its sustenance from the late autumn harvest. "I can make the march," Sherman said, "and make Georgia howl."

Sherman recalled in his memoirs the political *esprit du corps* of the soldiers on the first day:

"We rode out of Atlanta by the Decatur road, filled by the marching troops and wagons of the Fourteenth Corps; and reaching the hill, just outside of the old rebel works, we naturally paused to look back upon the scenes of our past battles. Behind us lay Atlanta, smouldering and in ruins, the black smoke rising high in air, and hanging like a pall over the ruined city.... Some band, by accident, struck up the anthem of 'John Brown's soul goes marching on' the men caught up the strain, and never before or since have I heard the chorus of 'Glory, glory, hallelujah!' done with more spirit, or in better harmony of time and place."

His strategy was based on Grant's Vicksburg Campaign in the fall of 1862, when the latter had separated himself from his supply lines and tore through the Mississippi countryside, living off the land and inflicting a series of defeats on Confederate armies before laying siege to Vicksburg, the last major Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River. It was here too that Grant was taught the usefulness of the slaves as a lever against the Confederacy. They fled their plantations, denying the South its primary labor force, while adding new manpower to the Union armies.

Sherman was never as sympathetic to the slaves as Grant, or for that matter his own brother John Sherman, a Republican Senator from Ohio. But unlike McClellan, Sherman understood emancipation and the requisitioning of enemy property as a means toward the end of defeating the rebellion.

"We are fighting not only a hostile army but a hostile people and everyone, young and old, rich and poor, man, woman and child must be made to feel the hard hand of war," Sherman said. "We cannot change the hearts of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible...that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it."

Such rhetoric might suggest to a modern reader "total war"—a twentieth century concept associated especially with World War II and the massive destruction and wholesale slaughter inflicted upon civilian populations.

The term is an anachronism when applied to the Civil War. There was no mass killing of civilians by Sherman's troops. Though crimes were certainly committed by individual soldiers, Sherman explicitly targeted enemy production, which he studied using the 1860 Federal Census prior to his campaign. Sherman ordered his corps commanders to distinguish "between the rich, who are usually hostile, and the poor or industrious, usually neutral or friendly," and to not "destroy mills, houses, cotton-gins., [i]n districts and neighborhoods where the army is unmolested." He even commanded soldiers in foraging to "refrain from abusive or threatening language [and] endeavor to leave with each family a reasonable portion for their maintenance."

The destruction was nonetheless immense. Sherman estimated the army inflicted damage of \$100 million (1864 dollars) to Georgia's economy, probably an underestimate. The northern soldiers laid waste to about 300 miles of railroad, telegraph lines and bridges. In tearing up the railway lines, they heated steel rails red hot and then wrapped them around tree trunks so they could not be reused. These became known in the South as "Sherman's neckties." The Army of Tennessee also took tens of thousands of head of livestock and draft animals.

The southern army, meanwhile, was disintegrating. Before the fall of Atlanta Confederate President Jefferson Davis, wishing for a more aggressive strategy, promoted John Bell Hood of Texas to command in Georgia, removing the capable but defensive-minded General Joseph Johnston.

Misreading Sherman's strategy, Hood led what remained of the Western Confederate Army in a desperate assault on Union supply lines in Tennessee. This campaign resulted in the shattering of Hood's army in the Battle of Franklin, where the general sent his soldiers, many of them shoeless, over two miles of open field in the face of Union artillery, suffering 13,000 losses. His subsequent defeat at the Battle of Nashville resulted in the utter rout of the Confederate forces.

"Never had there been such an overwhelming victory during the Civil War—indeed, never in American military history," writes

historian Wiley Sword. Hood's reckless squandering of soldiers was remembered in the ironic final verse of a popular southern war song, "The Yellow Rose of Texas":

*And now I'm going southward, for my heart is full of woe,  
I'm going back to Georgia, to see my Uncle Joe.  
You may talk about your Beauregard, and sing of Bobbie Lee,  
But the gallant Hood of Texas played hell in Tennessee.*

There was nothing standing in Sherman's way. His army advanced at a clip of twelve miles per day, even while taking time to dismantle infrastructure in a swath 20 to 40 miles wide. The soldiers ate well off the Georgia harvest. "This is probably the most gigantic pleasure excursion ever planned," wrote one officer.

Sherman moved so far from his supply and communication lines that his army's whereabouts became uncertain, the "lost army," a source of wild media speculation. The London *Times* mocked the "mysterious expedition of General Sherman, on an unknown route against an undiscoverable enemy." Lincoln said in those days of Sherman, "we all know where he went in at, but I can't tell where he'll come out at."

But then, on December 21, Lincoln received a telegram from Sherman: "I beg to present you as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and about 25,000 bails of cotton." Lincoln confessed earlier doubts about the plan. "When you were leaving Atlanta for the Atlantic coast, I was anxious, if not fearful; but feeling that you were the better judge, and remembering that 'nothing risked, nothing gained' I did not interfere," he wrote back. "But what next?"

What came next was the end game of the war. The object now was to place Confederate Commander Robert E. Lee and the Richmond, Virginia rebel government of Jefferson Davis between the hammer and the anvil. Sherman would move on Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from the south, while Grant would continue to push down from the north with the Union's biggest force, the Army of the Potomac. "Grant has the bear by the hind leg while Sherman takes off the hide," as Lincoln put it.

After a few days rest, Sherman wheeled the Army of Tennessee northward, putting it on a march through the Carolinas. Moving in winter and through difficult terrain the progress was slower but just as inexorable as it had been in Georgia. "I resolved that there had been no such army in existence since the days of Julius Caesar," said Gen. Johnston, who had been put back in command by Davis after Hood's debacle.

Testimony suggests that the Union soldiers took particular feeling in laying waste to South Carolina, the cradle of the slaveholders' rebellion, in order "to avenge the national wrong which they attach ... for dragging our country into civil war," Sherman said. Union forces made it through most of North Carolina and nearly to Virginia. They fought their last major battle against Johnston's forces in late March, 140 miles separating them from Lee, and not quite three weeks ahead of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

To generations of "Lost Cause" advocates, the historian-apologists for the Confederacy, Sherman loomed as the *bête noire* of the Civil War, more hated even than Lincoln and Grant. This school of thought made its way into countless high school and college history textbooks, where the Civil War was portrayed not as the "irrepressible conflict," but as a tragic mistake, and Sherman's march therefore wantonly destructive.

This approach has faded, but other forms of historical distortion attempt to fill the breach.

New York ~~Writing~~ Opinionator on the November

historian W. Todd Groce draws an equal sign between Sherman's march and the use of torture in Washington's "war on terror." He writes, "Like the total war tactics of his 20th century successors and the 'enhanced interrogation techniques' employed more recently, the March to the Sea reveals the moral ambiguity of war and the extent to which Americans are willing to go when our national existence is at stake."

In fact there is nothing "morally ambiguous" about either Sherman's March to the Sea or the Bush and Obama administrations' use of torture. The latter is the outcome of the barbarism of American capitalism in its decline; the former a tool for the emancipation of the slaves in its ascent.

Indeed it is only by ignoring the question of slavery—the word does not even appear in his column—that Groce can make such a preposterous comparison.

The Army of Tennessee was, in effect, an army of liberation; the enforcer of the Emancipation Proclamation. As it bore down on "the Cotton Kingdom" thousands of slaves fled their plantations and sought protection, food and shelter, in the ranks. Sherman employed as many as possible; many others were allowed to follow along as best they could.

Sherman went a step further in January of 1865, when, pushed by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, he issued his Special Field Orders, No. 15. This confiscated 400,000 acres of plantation land in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, and divided it into 40-acre lots for the freed slaves.

In typical fashion, Sherman saw this as a reasonable military measure. But there was powerful justice to it. Did not the freed slaves deserve the land of the traitor slaveholders, as compensation "for all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil," as Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural address? The freedmen felt certain it should be so; from Sherman's field order "forty acres and a mule," became their slogan.

In the years after the war, Sherman's act was reversed. There would be no division of the southern land. The Republican Party, having confiscated the human chattel of the Southern oligarchy, would go no farther. Nor could it. This was a party of capitalist private property; the Civil War the second and culminating stage of America's bourgeois revolution. No new class of small commercial farmers, such as then existed at its zenith in the North, would be created in the South.

This in no way detracts from the significance of the Civil War or the revolutionary methods that secured Union victory, including those employed by Sherman.



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