

THE SACK OF THE SOUTH

When General Sherman marched 62,000 Union troops through the south in 1864, he left a 50-mile-wide path of destruction, says **Anne Sarah Rubin**, destroying the Confederacy's morale and ability to wage war

WHEN THE YANKEES came, Claiborne Moss was not even eight years old. He had been born a slave on Archie Duggins' plantation near Sandersville, Georgia, and there he watched as blue-coated Union soldiers swept through on what has become famous as Sherman's March. The soldiers "stole everything that they could lay their hands on – all the gold and silver that was in the house, and everything they could carry."

Sherman's troops wreak destruction on a Georgia plantation in 1864

Claiborne watched as a lost Yankee came back and asked for directions and then Moss's master "pointed the way with his left hand and while the fellow was looking that way, he drug him off his horse and cut his throat..."

In North Carolina, Elizabeth Collier sat helplessly as "a party of most desperate fellows" broke down the back door of her home in Everettsville, and then "commenced their sacking of the house and did not cease until they had taken

everything to eat the house contained... Curses and oaths were uttered on all sides – it was truly fearful." The Union soldiers tried to set the house on fire, ransacked trunks and bureaus, and stole valuables. Collier and her family had to leave their home and become refugees, with little more than the clothes on their backs.

General Sherman's March through Georgia and Carolina, bringing the war directly to the civilians of the south, took place from autumn 1864 to late



spring 1865. A few years later, Union General EF Noyes addressed a reunion of veterans, nostalgically recalling that "in this rollicking picnic expedition there was just enough of fighting for variety, enough of hardship to give zest to the repose which followed it, and enough of ludicrous adventure to make its memory a constant source of gratification."

An enslaved child; a southern white woman; a Union veteran. Each experienced Sherman's March, each lived to tell the tale, but their stories differ profoundly. What they share, however, is the experience of close contact between soldiers and civilians, an intimate warfare whose contours were directed from the top down.

Capture of Atlanta

General Sherman's Union Army had captured the southern city of Atlanta in early September 1864. Soon after that he decided to evacuate the city's civilian population. He wanted the city, an important railway hub, to be a purely military base – he didn't want to deal with feeding or protecting civilians, or guarding his troops against guerrillas and spies.

When the mayor of Atlanta protested, Sherman simply explained that "war is cruelty and you cannot refine it." Some 1,600 whites and blacks were forced out of the city, onto the roads of Georgia.

Sherman did not want to permanently occupy Atlanta. He received permission to break free from his supply lines and march across Georgia to the coast to link up with the Union Navy. To that end, Sherman divided his 62,000-man army into two wings, each comprising two Corps: the Fifteenth and Seventeenth in the Right Wing, the Fourteenth and Twentieth in the Left Wing. Almost 5,000 cavalymen under Judson Kilpatrick would weave back and forth. Thus Sherman's March actually proceeded in four columns, covering a distance of as many as 50 miles from edge to edge. The March didn't proceed like a lawnmower, cutting down everything in its path, but more like a reaper, destroying some areas and leaving others untouched.

Before setting out, Sherman tried to set some ground rules. His Special

Field Orders No. 120 ordered his men to "forage liberally on the country," and "to destroy mills, houses, cotton-gins, etc," but within limits. The foraging parties were supposed to be regularised and under the control of "discreet" officers; soldiers were not supposed to enter homes; should the army be left "unmolested", southern property was also supposed to be left alone.

Sherman also ordered that when livestock was being seized, his men ought to discriminate "between the rich, who are usually hostile, and the poor and industrious, usually neutral or friendly."

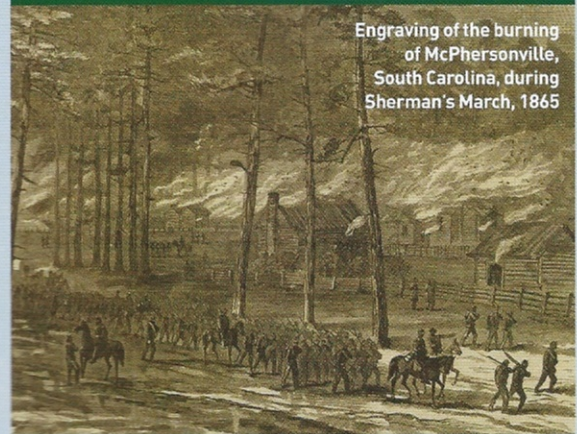
As for African-Americans, Sherman was willing to permit commanders to put able-bodied men who could "be of service" into pioneer corps, but urged them to be mindful of their limited supplies. In effect, he was telling his men to leave the newly-freed women and children behind. Most of these rules were honoured more in the breach than in reality, but their very existence gave Sherman (and to an arguably lesser extent his men) a degree of moral cover. They certainly allowed for a certain elasticity – harsher treatment of some people in some places, leniency elsewhere.

Killing and looting

The marchers left Atlanta on 15 November, travelling about 10 miles a day – a leisurely pace for experienced veterans. They looted homes and churches, burned barns and cotton gins. They stole food, horses, silver and jewellery, and killed livestock and the dogs that had once been used to track runaway slaves.

William McCullough of Jones County remembered Union

Scorched earth morality



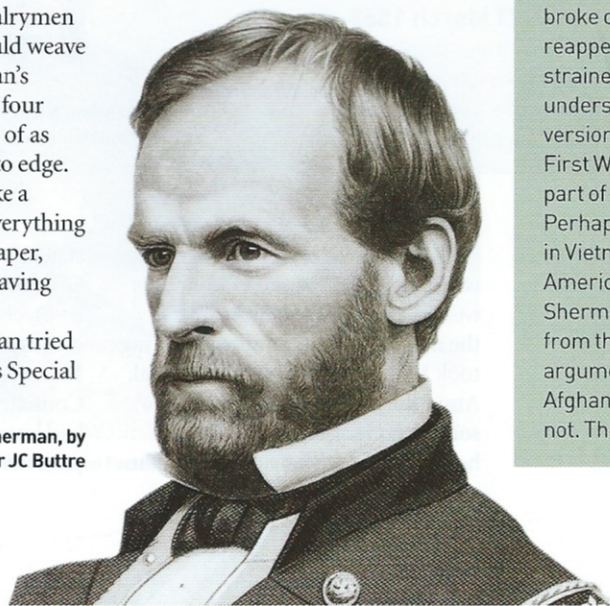
Engraving of the burning of McPhersonville, South Carolina, during Sherman's March, 1865

THE MORALITY AND legality of Sherman's March, with its targeting of civilian infrastructure and supplies, have been debated since it first set off. Today debate rages on civil war blogs and message boards on topics such as "was Sherman a war criminal?" There are accusations that he was the originator of 'total war.' In the 1980s, James Reston Jr argued that one could connect Sherman's March, via the direct targeting of civilians in the Second World War, to Vietnam-era atrocities including the My Lai massacre. Sherman is still described as a merchant of terror who cared nothing for the people whose homes and livelihoods he or his men destroyed.

The reality of this is more complicated. Sherman was not the first Union general to use 'hard war' tactics against southern civilians but he did so on a much larger, more public and arguably more unabashed scale. While there were no international laws of war in 1864, the Union army was governed by its own guidelines, known as the Lieber Code, which allowed for hostile civilians to be "subjected to the hardships of the war." At the same time, however, the code also prohibited "wanton violence" and unauthorised destruction. Sherman believed he was operating within the laws of war and parameters of so-called civilised behaviour. He never apologised for the March and, indeed, took pride in its role in bringing the war to a close.

As the 19th century became the 20th and as wars of increasing deadliness and destructive power broke out around the globe, the March seemed to reappear again and again. Often, the analogy was strained, but it revealed much about the common understanding of the March, or of a simplified version of it. German atrocities in Belgium in the First World War were compared to the March, as part of a debate over American neutrality in 1915. Perhaps because increasing American involvement in Vietnam coincided with the centennial of the American Civil War, the analogies between Sherman's March and Vietnam came thick and fast from the 1960s to 1980s. Sherman is often invoked in arguments about American tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes approvingly, sometimes not. The legacy of Sherman's March continues.

General William Sherman, by 19th-century engraver JC Buttre



SHERMAN'S MARCH The Union army takes war to the south, 1864/65



1 15 November 1864

William T Sherman and his 62,000-man army, split into two wings, march out of Atlanta heading for Savannah and the sea.

2 23 November 1864

The Left Wing of Sherman's forces takes Milledgeville, then capital of Georgia – the first of three state capitals they will take on their march through southern heartlands.

3 27 November 1864

Soldiers find the abandoned remains of Camp Lawton, a Confederate prison, and the graves of hundreds of Union soldiers. They vent their anger on the town of Millen.

4 9 December 1864

In an act of brutal cruelty, African-Americans following in the wake of Sherman's army are left to drown or be captured by Confederates at Ebenezer Creek.

5 22 December 1864

Sherman and his army march into the city of Savannah, concluding the first phase of their campaign to take war to the south.

21 January 1865

Sherman and his men leave Savannah for South Carolina, determined to make the state pay for secession and for the firing on Fort Sumter that had sparked the war in 1861.

6 17 February 1865

The city of Columbia, South Carolina, is engulfed in fire, sparking off a debate about whether it was set by Sherman's men or retreating Confederates.

7 19-21 March 1865

Sherman's men face Confederates under General Joseph Johnston at the battle of Bentonville, North Carolina, the last battle of the campaign.

8 26 April 1865

Johnston surrenders to Sherman at the Bennett Place, a farmhouse near Durham, North Carolina. It is the largest surrender of the civil war.

24 May 1865

Sherman's men march in the Grand Review in Washington, DC, accompanied by free blacks and some of the spoils of war, including cows and mules taken along the way.



Between towns, Sherman's men walked at the relatively gentle pace of 10 miles a day

➤ soldiers burning his home. He recalled that they left his family with only "the clothes we had on; no food and no place to sleep... for days we ate our corn left on the ground by the Yankees' horses."

Union soldiers faced few obstacles and fought just one battle in Georgia

– at Griswoldville, on 22 November, where they realised their opponents were young boys and old men. On the next day soldiers of the Left Wing took Milledgeville, Georgia's capital. Amid their flurry of destruction, some regiments took time out to hold a mock legislative session in the

statehouse, symbolically voting Georgia back into the Union.

Over the following week, troops converged on the small town of Millen in the hopes of liberating a Confederate prison. Camp Lawton had been hastily built to hold Union prisoners of war and was just as

hastily evacuated in advance of the March. When Sherman's men found the abandoned camp, along with 700 graves, they vented their anger in town, torching the railroad depot and hotel.

The soldiers reached the outskirts of Savannah on 10 December and found it defended by 10,000 Confederates. Sherman bypassed it temporarily, captured Fort McAllister and reopened his communication lines. Savannah surrendered rather than be subjected to bombardment. On 22 December, General Sherman telegraphed 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."

A trail of smoke

The journey from Atlanta to Savannah is known as Sherman's March to the Sea. But after spending January in Savannah, Sherman and his men continued, moving out of the city and into South Carolina. This phase of the March would differ from the earlier one in two significant ways. It would be much harder going, through dense swamps. It would also be even more destructive.

Sherman recalled, somewhat disingenuously, that "somehow our men had got the idea that South Carolina was the cause of all our troubles... and therefore on them should fall the scourge of war in its worst form... and I would not restrain the army lest its vigor and energy should be impaired." And so the men moved on, inexorably, leaving a trail of smoke and rubble behind them. Several towns in South Carolina, particularly those along the



Sherman's men destroyed many of the south's railroads, cutting off Confederate supplies and cutting down their hopes

Sherman's troops stole food and horses and killed the dogs that had been used to track runaway slaves

railroad, were left in ruins during the first two weeks of February. In Barnwell, cavalrymen held a party with newly-freed slaves in the hotel as the town burned, quipping that the town should be called "Burnwell."

They arrived in the state capital of Columbia on 17 February 1865. Sherman and his men have long been charged with burning the city, but some conflicting evidence suggests that it was Confederates torching cotton that sparked the conflagration.

From Columbia, Union troops headed north into North Carolina,

a state to which they were more favourably disposed. Men who claimed to have taken the gloves off in South Carolina put them back on, in the hopes of not antagonising Unionists. They crossed the state, fighting Confederates at Averasboro and Bentonville, stopping in Fayetteville and Goldsboro. The March ended with the surrender of Joseph Johnston's Confederate army on 26 April 1865 at Bennett Place, a farmhouse near Durham.

The end of the road

The March destroyed Southern morale and the Confederacy's ability to wage war. It also freed many thousands of African-Americans from the shackles of slavery, even though Sherman himself was not an advocate for black equality. In addition, Sherman supported a "soft peace," one with generous terms. In the years after the war he supported the idea of white southerners regaining political control, often at the expense of African-Americans.

It is almost impossible to calculate how much damage the March caused. Some estimates put the cost at about \$100 million. While it may be difficult to count the human and monetary cost, the scope and drama of Sherman's March has granted it a symbolic power that continues to fascinate students of the civil war. **H**



Union forces take ammunition from the captured Fort McAllister before advancing to Savannah

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