

# The Path to Power



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Show of force A 19th-century engraving of Sherman's March. *The Granger Collection*

By

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Few events in American history are more encrusted with myth, symbolism and plain misinformation than William Tecumseh Sherman's bold march through Georgia and the Carolinas in the autumn of 1864 and early 1865. Even in a world inured to more recent episodes of mass violence, Sherman's March—or an imagined version of it—remains a byword for savagery.

In "Through the Heart of Dixie," Anne Sarah Rubin, a professor history at the University of Maryland, offers an engrossing exploration of the ways in which the march has been recounted and understood over

the years. She notes that it “has come to stand for devastation and destruction, fire and brimstone, war against civilians, and for the Civil War in microcosm.” It has been summoned as a metaphor for just about every sort of calamity, from the burning of the South Bronx to plagues of fire ants. Sherman himself came to be seen the “personification” of evil, Ms. Rubin says. If the marchers were Huns and Vandals, then “Sherman was Attila.”

## **Through the Heart of Dixie**

By Sarah Rubin North Carolina, 300 pages, \$35

African-Americans, though relying on similar imagery, have generally recalled the march in a very different light—as the emblem of a sweeping, righteous crusade. Ms. Rubin cites a powerful, though ultimately deleted, passage from John Lewis’s speech at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington. The civil-rights leader was persuaded to leave it out because it was felt by some to be incendiary: “The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently.”

As it happens, Sherman’s March was less devastating than is usually alleged. And, for an operation of its size, it resulted in comparatively little loss of life. The strategic point of Sherman’s March was simple: to demonstrate that the Confederacy could no longer defend itself against federal armies. As Sherman put it: “This may not be war but rather Statesmanship.” A march through the South’s heartland, he continued, would show the Union’s power to prevail, “leaving only open the question of its willingness to use that power.”

Sherman’s 60,000 troops followed a narrow line of advance, 60 miles at its widest, and within that corridor they proceeded in mostly self-contained columns. It’s true enough that railroads and Confederate military supplies were destroyed, many plantation houses burned, horses and mules confiscated or killed, and large quantities of food seized to feed Sherman’s men. (The homes of the poor and of avowed Unionists were generally left alone.) Most of South Carolina’s capital of Columbia was burned to the ground, though whether Sherman’s men or retreating Confederates started the blaze remains disputed. Ms. Rubin observes that, although widespread rape has often been associated with Sherman’s March, there is scant evidence for it.

Between Sherman’s departure from Atlanta in November 1864 and his final battle at Bentonville, N.C., in March 1865, about 2,500 Confederate soldiers may have been killed—a small figure compared with the Civil War’s normally staggering carnage—and no more than a handful of civilians. At the same time, Confederate cavalymen wantonly murdered captured Union soldiers and only stopped doing so when Sherman threatened to retaliate in kind.

“Through the Heart of Dixie” is not a conventional military history. For that, readers might wish to turn to Robert O’Connell’s excellent new biography, “Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman,” or Sherman’s own memoirs, first published in 1875. Ms. Rubin is more interested in the often contradictory ways in which white and black Southerners, and Union veterans, remembered the march.

She provides a multitude of voices. Among them: 87-year-old Henry Jenkins telling a WPA interviewer in the 1930s that the Yankees “seemed more concerned ’bout stealin’, than they was ’bout de Holy war for de liberation of de poor African slave people”; a Union cavalryman, Smith Atkins, matter-of-factly describing leaving the bodies of 500 slaughtered horses in front of a planter’s mansion; Eliza Andrews recalling hungry white families in Georgia scavenging grains of corn left behind on Yankee campgrounds; former slave Henry Wright reporting that Yankees asked slaves whether their master was “mean” or not before deciding to torch plantations.

Most Yankee veterans, Ms. Rubin reports, remembered Sherman’s March “as a picnic, a lark, a time of good food and short marches, not searing flames and frightened women.” In essence, there is no single story of Sherman’s March but thousands, and though the Union forces wreaked havoc on the towns in Sherman’s path, their actions do not add up to the apocalyptic barbarism that plays such a role in Lost Cause mythology.

That mythology, Ms. Rubin makes clear, was crafted by the Jim Crow politics and resurgent Southern chauvinism of the post-Reconstruction period. Georgians who lived through the war and its immediate aftermath were more objective, and more forgiving. When Sherman, by then the commander of the U.S. Army, traveled south on a tour in 1881, he was welcomed with cheers when he declared to an Atlanta audience: “I am just as friendly to Georgia as I am to my own native state of Ohio.”

—Mr. Bordewich’s most recent book  
is “America’s Great Debate: Henry  
Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise That Preserved the Union.”