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## **"Thieves, Murderers, Trespassers":**

### **The Mythology of Sherman's March**

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Few images in American history have entrenched themselves more firmly than that of William T. Sherman burning Atlanta and then carving a 220-mile swath of destruction in his fiery March to the Sea. Anyone who trifles with that image does so at some peril. We are dealing with a powerful piece of mythology.

I use the term "mythology" with care. I do not mean it in the sense of falsehood or misconception. Myths are seldom true in the strictest sense, but they usually contain a larger truth that is conveyed all the more powerfully by the fact that it is not detained about mundane points of accuracy. In the case of Sherman's march, the myth is so compelling that people hold to it despite obvious contradictions, which are explained away or simply ignored. A reporter discovered this in 1958 while researching a story about the Civil War in Marietta, Georgia. A Southern matron with whom he spoke gave him a glass of iced tea and told him earnestly that Sherman's demons had burned the town to the ground when they came through in 1864. Afterward, the reporter commented dryly, "we went outside to admire the fine antebellum homes."

The mythology of Sherman's march is part of a larger mythology concerning the conduct of Northern armies toward Southern civilians. The classic picture runs something like this: The Civil War began as a contest between armies, characterized by laudable restraint on the part of generals such as Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan. Then generals like Ulysses S. Grant, Philip Sheridan, and above all, William T. Sherman, created a new brand of warfare in which the objective was not simply the enemy's armies but also his economic resources and population. Southern depictions of the North's hard war--enshrined in films like *Gone With the Wind*--went further. Sherman's troops, declared the Southern historian John Bennett Walters, "left behind them a trail of terror and desolation, burned homes and towns, devastated fields and plundered storehouses, and a record for systematic torture, pillage, and vandalism unequalled in American history."

This perspective remains powerful after the passage of more than a century. Just two years ago--130 years after Sherman began his famous March to the Sea--the North Carolina Secretary of Cultural Resources could threaten to block a proposed monument to Sherman's soldiers at Bentonville, the state's principal Civil War battleground. The troops, she said, had been commanded by a man "more evil than Ivan the Terrible or Genghis Khan." The state commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans agreed: "Monuments should be erected to heroes. These were no heroes. They were thieves, murderers, rapists, arsonists, trespassers." Permission to erect the monument was denied.

Today I would like to address three questions about this powerful mythology concerning Sherman's march. First, what is the factual basis of the myth? Second, what purposes did it serve when originally created? And finally, what purposes does it serve today?

### **The Factual Basis of the Myth**

Civil War historians have long known that stories of widespread rape and murder by Union soldiers lack much historical foundation. There is simply very little evidence to support them. But until quite recently historians did tend to dwell heavily on the destructive aspects of Sherman's marches, and the dominant portrayal was one of hardened veterans no longer animated by moral considerations.

That assessment is one that I too shared for a number of years. But eventually I became troubled, for official Union policy plainly did not contemplate such indiscriminate destruction. And although wanton depredations certainly occurred, I discovered almost no instances in which white Southerners were killed, assaulted, or raped. Indeed, my reading of the evidence did not sustain a portrayal of unrestrained destruction even of property. After a while it seemed to me that the dominant theme of the Union hard war operations was as less an erosion of values than an on-going tension between competing sets of values. Union soldiers clearly came to understand the need to destroy Southern war resources and they also embraced the conviction that some Southern civilians deserved punishment for their role in starting or sustaining the war. But the same sense of justice that created this desire for retribution also insisted that punishment should fall upon the guilty. The result was indeed severity, but it was a directed severity aimed--and for the most part, aimed effectively--at certain portions of the Confederate population and economic infrastructure.

In my research I was surprised by how frequently Federal commanders called for this directed severity and also by how readily rank-and-file soldiers accepted and obeyed it. The unauthorized destruction that attended Sherman's marches was mainly, in the phrase of corps commander Major General Alpheus S. Williams, the work of "the few (ever found in large bodies of men) who were disorderly and vicious." The chief exception was South Carolina. From the moment the Federals crossed the Savannah River, incidents of pillaging and arson accelerated dramatically. The perpetrators were no

longer the marginal soldiers alone, but included many of the best, most motivated troops. What happened to South Carolina forcefully underscored the substantially directed nature of the severity that had preceded it. It showed what a Federal army could do when it wanted to wreak indiscriminate havoc.

The reason for this massive increase in violence--noticed and widely remarked on by contemporary observers--was simple. South Carolina had been the first state to secede. Not only that, it was almost universally believed to be filled, from one end to the other, with the most virulent, dedicated disunionists. It was an article of faith with most Northerners that South Carolina, as the cockpit of secession, bore most of the blame for the war. The most serious single act of destruction--and highly controversial, since it is unclear exactly who began the blaze--was the burning of Columbia. But the scale of the overall devastation was enormous. "The army burned everything it came near in the State of South Carolina," wrote an Indiana major, "not under orders, but in spite of orders. The men `had it in' for the State, and they took it out in their own way. Our track through the State is a desert waste."

But, the major added, "Since entering North Carolina the wanton destruction has stopped." It was true. The Tarheel State received much the same treatment as Georgia--possibly even a bit milder, since North Carolina was not part of the Deep South, was known to harbor significant Unionist sentiment, and had been one of the last states to secede. Certainly a number of Federal commanders issued directives encouraging gentler behavior. The abrupt cessation of the maelstrom that engulfed South Carolina formed one of the strongest proofs of the sense of discriminating righteousness that animated the Federal rank and file.

## **The Myth**

Since it is not at all difficult to show that Union forces exercised a directed severity during the war, an obvious question emerges: If the Union military effort against Southern property was indeed discriminate and roughly proportional to legitimate needs, why have so many interpretations insisted for so long that it was indiscriminate and all-annihilating? One likely reason such myth-making has been pervasive is that it has served a variety of agendas.

In the postwar South, the legend of Yankee ruffians waging campaigns of fire and vandalism was surely useful in several respects. First, it helped Southern conservatives to convince their fellow white Southerners that a terrible wrong had been done them--a conviction that resonated well with the humiliations of military Reconstruction. Second, it played into the myth of a South beaten down by brute force, not defeated by military art and certainly not by internal divisions or a failure of national will.

Third, the myth of Yankee atrocities accounted for the economic disaster that gripped the South after 1865. As historians have since pointed out, the destruction of Southern crops, livestock, factories, and railroads, and other infrastructure was anything but

complete; much of the damage was repaired within a few years. The really serious economic losses can be traced to two things: the emancipation of slaves, which wiped out billions of dollars in Southern wealth, and the worthlessness of Confederate scrip, bonds, and promissory notes into which many Southerners had sunk most of their savings. Both, of course, could be better traced to the South's decision to secede--and so begin the war--than to anything that Union soldiers did. Thus the emphasis on hard war, as an explanation for the economic devastation of the South, may have diverted attention from Southern responsibilities in bringing on the war, and thus for the outcome.

I suspect the mythology served less political purposes as well. Imagine that you are a woman living in the 1880s or 1890s, and that you are telling your grandchildren what it was like to live through the passage of Union armies through your village or farm. Obviously you survived the encounter, and probably so did the house you lived in. You may tell your grandchildren that the slaves ran off, that a Yankee soldier pilfered the silverware, that other soldiers tracked mud through the parlor, that they ransacked the smokehouse and burned the cotton gin. All these details will be accurate enough. But how can you satisfactorily convey the mortal peril you remember having felt, the fear that you might be assaulted, raped, or killed? It seems to me that you could hardly expect to convey this by pointing out that Yankee soldiers rarely did such things. Instead you would have every reason to repeat stories, however dubious, of assaults, rapes and murders that occurred elsewhere. This mythical retelling would serve an important purpose: It would keep alive a sense of the terror you felt, whereas a fully accurate retelling would make your fears seem misplaced. Further, the sense of violation that attended the invasion of your house by Union soldiers and the loss of precious family heirlooms would be undercut if you were to emphasize, for example, that in fact only a few soldiers got inside the house and that an arriving officer soon ordered them to leave.

Let me give you an example of this private myth-making at work. It comes from the unpublished reminiscences of a woman, Grace Pierson Beard, who lived about eight miles from Winnsboro, South Carolina. Her postwar account, now preserved in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC, consumes fifteen typescript, single-spaced pages. In it she describes how, returning to her home in February 1865, she encountered soldiers in her house, seated on benches taken from her piazza. They were roasting potatoes taken from her potato bank in a fire they had built in her fireplace. "I shall never forget that sight!" she writes dramatically--but then goes on to say that these men turned out to be members of Wheeler's Confederate cavalry, and nothing in her narrative suggests that she was in the least disturbed by their trespassing into her home.

Instead, the purpose of the men in her narrative is to convey a message about the danger she is in. Sherman's men were coming, they told her, and when she informed them of her plan to leave before their arrival, they responded that leaving would only guarantee the destruction of her house. "Sherman's orders are to burn all vacant houses and all provisions." Thus Grace decided to remain.

Next day, a group of Union soldiers arrived, killed a dog, and ate everything at her table, but left without assailing anyone. The day after a major force passed through--they

ransacked her house for provisions and allegedly told her slaves not only that they were free, but also entitled to their mistress's possessions. (No one acted on this, however.) Her barn and outbuildings were burned. Some soldiers said threatening things, but another soldier deterred them with, "The first man who attempts to enter that house will have his brains blown out." Subsequently a second, self-appointed guard appeared, followed by a soldier who looked so much like her husband that her toddler son ran up to him, leaped into his arms, and called him Pa. The soldier "seemed to be much affected" by this. So was she: "I felt as if my baby was everlastingly polluted."

That was the extent of Mrs. Beard's experience with the coming of Lucifer's legions: vigorous foraging, the destruction of outbuildings, the liberation of slaves, and repeated efforts to extort possessions from her--which were never pursued to the point of assault and were, in any case, countered by soldiers who actively protected her family and herself. All this information is in her reminiscences, but the tone is one of fear and outrage, and the tone governs what an uncritical reader takes away from her reminiscences. In effect, Mrs. Beard--like thousands of other white Southerners--has constructed a mythical reading of her experience that emphasizes the harshness and injustice of that experience.

The influence of this myth can hardly be exaggerated. Even educated Southerners, far removed in time from the conflict, accepted it uncritically, indeed passionately. Eventually the murderous severity of the Union armies' attacks on civilian property became an article of faith. By the 1940s, one Southern historian could write, in a scholarly monograph, that "the invader did not limit himself to the property of people," but evidenced "considerable interest also in their persons, particularly the females, some of whom did not escape the fate worse than death"--without feeling the slightest need to document his lurid (and largely inaccurate) claim.

The myth of indiscriminate Union attacks on Southern civilians has served other agendas as well. For persons revolted by the slaughter on the Western Front, Sherman's marches and similar episodes aptly illustrated the brutalizing effects of war. Its utility in this respect has proven durable. Paradoxically, the image of a sweeping campaign of fire and sword also fits snugly into the "realist" image of war. The Union hard war measures resonate well with those who believe that in war one must do whatever is necessary to win. There is thus an admiring quality to some of the literature on William T. Sherman, the best known of the hard war advocates, whom Lloyd Lewis called a "fighting prophet." T. Harry Williams admired Grant's willingness to wage economic warfare, and called him the first of the great modern generals. Bruce Catton invariably discussed the Union war against Southern property as a case of "doing what has to be done to win."

Few of these characterizations did great violence to the facts. They simply emphasized certain facts at the expense of others. The Federal effort against Southern property was indeed widespread and quite destructive. But an effort was also made to direct destructive energies toward certain targets and away from others. Neither Southerners, "realists," nor those antipathetic toward war had any reason to emphasize the substantial restraint shown by Union forces in their operations against civilian property. For

Southerners, to do so would have undercut their sense of righteousness and comparative lack of responsibility for the debacle that engulfed them. For realists, it would have qualified their belief that one must do whatever must be done to gain victory in war. For those repulsed by war, it would have seemed to mitigate the brutalizing effects that war assuredly has on both societies and individuals.

But perhaps the most pervasive reason for the emphasis on the destructiveness of Union military policy has been the way in which it seemed to anticipate the sweeping struggles of the twentieth century. Especially after the Second World War, the Civil War appeared a clear prototype of modern, total war. It had witnessed the early development and use of trench warfare, ironclad warships, rapid-fire weapons, and even airships and crude machine guns. Its soldiers had traveled to the battle front aboard railroad cars and steam-driven transports; its generals had communicated with one another via endless miles of telegraph wire. It was one of the first struggles in which manufacturing and mass politics significantly affected the fighting and the outcome. The conflict's most striking modern aspect, however, was the Union attacks on Southern civilians and property. What happened to them no longer seemed merely atrocious; it foreshadowed the strategic bombardment of civilians during the two world wars. Thus it seems to me that historians bear considerable responsibility for perpetuating the mythology of Sherman's march.

## **Conclusion**

What purposes does the myth serve nowadays? You're perhaps as qualified as I am to answer that one. But it does seem to me that the notion that war is irretrievably evil is still around, and that those who hold such a view have little incentive to embrace the story of "directed severity" whose lesson is that the effective conduct of war need not extinguish the light of moral reason. In fact, one historian has called my book "an apology for war." Similarly, the "realist" notion that "war is hell" remains alive and well, and its proponents likewise have little reason to embrace a story that emphasizes how Sherman's men recognized the claims of morality and conducted a highly destructive but discriminating operation. And military historians are bound to be slow to give up an interpretation of the war that seems so perfectly to anticipate the total wars of the twentieth century.

The reasons Southerners continue to embrace this myth are more elusive. I strongly suspect that for most Southerners, Sherman's March has in fact lost its mythical significance. Instead it has become a little quaint, another piece of history that happened long, long ago. But for some it still continues to resonate, especially for whites discontented with Second Reconstruction; and for those unhappy with the rapid development and transformation of South, which seems to be as destructive of Southern distinctiveness and culture as Sherman's March was of Southern property.

The most interesting recent interpretation of Sherman's March I have seen occurs in a comic book published by a firm that specializes in the Confederate heritage. In this comic

book, the basic facts of Sherman's march are essentially correct, but like Mrs. Beard's reminiscences, expressed in language and imagery that conveys an impression of apocalypse. The most interesting aspect of the comic, however, is its depiction of an African American southerner named Luther--an escaped slave who joins Sherman's army during its march through Georgia.

Luther wants to "fight for the Union," but is told that "Uncle Billy don't allow no darkies in his army." Instead he is put to work on a fatigue detail, and subsequently his wife is sexually assaulted by Union bummers. Attempting to defend her, Luther is bludgeoned into unconsciousness.

In anger he then approaches the Confederate militia-- "I want to join you!" "Then come on!" a white militiaman responds. In the ensuing battle with Sherman's forces, Luther is killed. His wife finds him on the battlefield, cradles his head in her arms, and says tenderly, "At last you're finally free." The final panel notes that "Sherman's march cut a swath 250 miles long and 60 miles wide from Atlanta to the sea. The economic and social damage to the region would be felt for decades. . . . The bitter feelings resulting from that 250 mile scar lived on through Reconstruction and into the next century. . . and for some that bitterness is still felt today."

It is not at all difficult to grasp the point of this latest mythical appropriation of Sherman's march. The destructiveness of the march is still there as an explanation of the "economic and social damage" that gripped the postwar South. But the massive human destructiveness of slavery that helped create the war--and that Sherman's march helped destroy--is distorted almost out of recognition. The slave Luther is displayed as a skilled artisan who works in a gunmaker's shop until the Yankees destroy it. Intent on becoming "free," he then attempts to join his Yankee liberators, only to find himself and his wife cruelly exploited. Finally he rejoins his white masters, is readily welcomed, and fights alongside them on terms of complete masculine equality. In this depiction, slavery is read almost entirely out of the Civil War--just as it is read out of the conflict by "neo-Confederates" who assert that as many as 100,000 African Americans fought for the Confederacy. Plainly, a society in which such a scene could occur is not a society in which slavery was a vicious institution nor one in which blacks would desire freedom unless deluded by Yankee propaganda. And plainly this is a society in which race relations were unusually harmonious--until the Yankees came and ruined everything.