



Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War

by Matthew Carr.

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In *Sherman's Ghosts*, journalist Matthew Carr examines Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman's method of waging war against civilians, particularly during his infamous "March to the Sea." He first gives a balanced and nuanced account of the strategic justifications for Sherman's original campaign and then describes its legacy of influence on American military occupations since the Spanish-American War. Carr specifically debunks "postmodern" myths of a "surgical" style of technological warfare that supposedly minimizes civilian casualties, stressing that the true goal of any military conflict is "to produce results by death and slaughter" (280). General Sherman would have approved the unflinching realism of this perspective.

By the time Sherman took Atlanta in November 1864, the Union's military and political leaders had adopted a "hard war" strategy that departed from President Abraham Lincoln's initially conciliatory prosecution of the war. Union General-in-Chief Henry Halleck wrote to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in April 1863 that "The character of the war has changed very much with the last year. There is now no possible hope of reconciliation with the rebels.... There can be no peace but that which is forced by the sword. We must conquer the rebels or be conquered by them." This mentality—the product of massive losses sustained by both sides at battles like Shiloh, Second Manassas, and Antietam—was reflected in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which "was intended to preempt the possibility of international recognition of the Confederacy and pave the way for the formation of black regiments" (25).

Sherman had been primed for this change in Union strategy by his experiences as a young Army officer. After graduating from West Point in 1840, he was posted to the Florida Everglades, where the government was waging the Second Seminole War (1835-42). The frustration of combating an insurgency of one thousand Indians in swamp conditions ended when Col. William J. Worth shrewdly "turned the war in the government's favor by sending small units into the Everglades outside the normal hunting season, in the winter, to burn and destroy Seminole camps, canoes, crops, and food supplies rather than hunt their elusive combatants. These operations contain the outlines of Sherman's future campaigns in the Civil War and also in the West" (32). Sherman was influenced, too, by Dennis Hart Mahan, one of his instructors at West Point: "In his standard textbook, ... Mahan argued that 'carrying the war into the heart of the assailant's country, or that of his allies, is the surest plan of making him share its burdens and foiling his plans'" (56).

From the commencement of hostilities between North and South, "Sherman never believed that the South could be brought back to the Union through a policy of conciliation." He wrote to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase in August 1862 that "When one nation is at war with another, all the people of the one are the enemies of the other; then the rules are plain and easy of understanding." Stating a rationale that his intellectual successors would use to justify their "pacification" of noncombatants, Sherman wrote Grant that same month, promising to "make this war as severe as possible, and show no symptoms of tiring till the South begs for mercy; indeed, I know, and you know, that the end would be reached quicker by such a course than by any seeming yielding on our part" (39; my emphasis). Even

more bluntly, he told a subordinate officer in July 1862 that “To secure the safety of the navigation of the Mississippi [he] would slay millions” (40). Carr rightly sets such statements against Sherman’s documented willingness to reconcile with Confederates as soon as they laid down their arms. An example of this is his controversial settlement with Gen. Joseph Johnston after Appomattox, allowing the Confederates to keep their slaves, a political stipulation that Grant swiftly countermanded.

Carr maintains that the “March to the Sea” from Atlanta to Savannah was notable not for the devastation and lawlessness it involved, but for “the fact that a democratic state regarded a campaign of strategic devastation against its own citizens as a legitimate instrument of psychological subjugation and politico-military domination” (63). Sherman himself cast the psychological intent of his campaign in biblical language—“to whip the rebels, to humble their pride, to follow them to their innermost recesses, and make them fear and dread us. Fear is the beginning of wisdom” (75). In a letter he wrote to Halleck after reaching Savannah, he elaborated on his strategic aims:

this war differs from European wars in this particular: we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies. I know that this recent movement of mine through Georgia has had a wonderful effect in this respect. Thousands who had been deceived by their lying newspapers to believe that we were being whipped all the time now realize the truth, and have no appetite for a repetition of the same experience. (75)

Carr credits Sherman for the relative restraint he showed in targeting property without denying the atrocities that marked his campaign, the destruction of Columbia foremost among them. Yet even that event furthered Sherman’s strategic goal of diminishing Southern civilians’ condoning of resistance to the federal government: “Though I never ordered it and never wished it, I have never shed many tears over the event, because I believed it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the war” (86–87). In the end, the “hard hand of war” brought about a quick cessation of hostilities.

Carr admits in his introduction that “I am not a Civil War historian” (7), and his book’s value lies not in breaking any new ground, but in demonstrating how Sherman’s strategic justification for targeting civilians became a recurrent feature of American warfare. The first such recurrence was inflicted by Sherman himself on the Plains Indians in the wake of the Civil War. Following an 1866 raid against a detachment of American soldiers by a combined force of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors, he wrote Grant that “We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children” (140). Reprising a tactic he had used during the Second Seminole War, Sherman ordered attacks against Plains Indians’ winter camps, outside of their traditional fighting season—“the destruction of their food supplies would target the whole population and facilitate the government’s assimilationist policy by driving Indians back into reservations” (141). Gen. Philip Sheridan, commander of the Department of the Platte and overseer of a critical campaign in the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War that mimicked the “March to the Sea,” wrote to Sherman of their exploits on the Western frontier:

If a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack. During the war did one hesitate to attack a village or town occupied by the enemy because women or children were within its limits? Did we cease to throw shells at Vicksburg or Atlanta because women or children were there? (142)

Both men saw the Plains Indians as a barrier to the westward advance of civilization and culled the buffalo herds they depended on in order to force them into submission. “Throughout the winter of 1876–77, cavalry columns systematically pursued a policy of starvation against the Sioux and Cheyenne, burning their camps and seizing their supplies of dried buffalo meat, their ponies, and their buffalo robes, leaving their destitute inhabitants exposed in the mountains in below-zero temperatures”

(143). Such tactics overcame Sioux resistance and by May 1877 most Plains tribes had retreated to reservations.

Moving on, Carr asserts that “More than any of America’s wars, the Philippine War of 1898–1902 bore the direct imprint of Sherman’s campaigns in terms of both strategy and personnel” (152). After the Spanish were driven from the archipelago, policymakers in President William McKinley’s administration underestimated the Filipinos’ desire for independence. When Gen. Arthur MacArthur Jr.’s grant of amnesty to Emilio Aguinaldo’s rebels failed to quell resistance to the American military occupation, “hard war” measures reminiscent of the last half of the Civil War were implemented. Besides “food denial operations,” American forces drove Filipino civilians into “zones of protection,” devastating the evacuated areas to deprive rebels of precious resources. After an assault on the Ninth Infantry Regiment in September 1901, Gen. Jacob H. Smith told Maj. Littleton W.T. “Tony” Waller

“I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me.” When Waller asked for clarification of these orders, he was told to kill every male on the island above the age of ten. For the next three months, Smith’s troops did their best to fulfill his instructions to turn Samar into a “howling wilderness,” in a chaotic, brutal, and badly organized campaign that wreaked havoc on the island’s 250,000 inhabitants.... [C]olumns of soldiers trekked through swamps and jungle, burning villages, hamlets, and farms and destroying or confiscating livestock and food supplies.... Summoned as a witness [at Waller’s court-martial], Smith affirmed that “treachery must be punished, that war must be prosecuted vigorously; that war was hell; that General Sherman had said that ‘war is hell,’ and that the quicker the war ended the less cruelty.” (155–56)

Carr insists that American occupations have been no more—and often less—brutal than those of other powers throughout history. Yet one conclusion to be drawn from his book is that American commanders have tended to appeal to Sherman’s strategic vision in order to rationalize the targeting of civilians.

Such tactics and justifications recurred during the Vietnam War. Carr notes that “Vietnamese peasants were removed en masse at gunpoint from their destroyed villages to fortified ‘strategic hamlets’ in order to drain the ‘sea’ in which the Vietcong guerrillas swam.... As in the Philippines, Sherman was often cited in connection with these campaigns” (161, 159). Harkening back to Sherman’s “forty acres and a mule” policy for parceling out confiscated Confederate lands to freed slaves (before President Andrew Johnson countermanded it), some American strategists saw the destruction of rural communities as “sociopolitical engineering,” a means to compel peasants to join an urban, American revolution. In this sense, “The rural pacification campaigns of the Philippines and Vietnam belong to a tradition of American counterinsurgency warfare that developed from Sherman’s Southern campaigns and the Indian wars in that they made little distinction between armed fighters and civilians and their political, military, and psychological goals overlapped” (163). Carr clarifies that this correspondence was not incidental: “In 1969, the army journalist Jay Roberts described the actions of Captain Ernest Medina’s C company at My Lai as ‘an old tactic and a good one. Sherman’s march to the sea’” (159). Carr repeatedly demonstrates that participants in and observers of US twentieth-century military invasions and occupations have seen close parallels with Sherman’s March.

The last third of *Sherman’s Ghosts* concerns American military interventions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Manuel Noriega’s deposition, Operation Desert Storm, and the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan figure prominently here. Carr juxtaposes visions of “surgical” warfare, unmanned drones, and Special Forces operations with the stark realities Sherman professed 150 years ago: war is an inherently chaotic enterprise intended to coerce an enemy people by brute force.

The idea that civilian populations bear responsibility for the armed groups in their midst and for the decisions of their government was one of the essential assumptions of the hard-war policies of Sherman,

Sheridan, and other Union generals and also of the strategic bombing of German and Japanese cities during World War II.... The continuing acceptance of this principle of collective responsibility ... has not changed as much as it might seem.... Today when so many Americans who've never been near a battlefield advocate new wars and pursue dreams of military omnipotence based on fantasies of immaculate destruction, Sherman's actual attitude to war is more relevant than ever. (285, 288)

Sherman's Ghosts will disabuse its readers of any notion that war can be humanized.