The Theology of the Battlefield: William Tecumseh Sherman and the U.S. Civil War

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ONE of General William Tecumseh Sherman's most admirable qualities was his insistence on sharing the hard truth of war with friend and foe alike. As commander of Union armies in the west during the final months of the Civil War, he had a lot to say about the things he did, at the time he was doing them. People may not have liked what he said or the way he said it, but they always knew where he stood and what he represented. He minced few words about the harsh reality of war and what it meant for soldier and civilian. In the midst of the Atlanta Campaign in Spring 1864, he admitted to his wife Ellen that his army had devoured the land and that "[a]ll retire before us, and desolation is behind. To realize what war is one should follow our tracks."1

Few soldiers were as honest or forthcoming as Sherman when it came to describing the moral and ethical challenges of command in a war that cast a broad net, entangling the lives of millions in its outcome. His wartime prose was thoughtful and imaginative, often philosophical, and, because of a consistent religious character, ultimately theological in its view of the world and God's dominion over it. Sherman relied heavily on religious imagery both to derive meaning from the war and to communicate his experience of it. Fundamentally, the Civil War, for Sherman, was a religious war, waged for religious reasons, by religious people who were conscious of the forces of good and evil that competed for the souls of men.

Despite the solemnity with which he conducted the business of war, Sherman professed no faith in organized religion. Organized religion neither encouraged the freedom of action he demanded nor allowed for the expression of a visionary impulse that became more pronounced as the war progressed. Prior to the war, he did advance organized religion as a practical and utilitarian measure for ordering the life of the community, but, beyond that, he had no use for it. In 1842, prior to his marriage to Ellen, he confessed to practicing or professing “no particular creed,” but remained true to a belief in the “the main doctrines of the Christian religion [and] the almost absolute necessity for its existence and practice among all well regulated communities.” His refusal to accept the importance attached “to minor points of doctrine or form” left him believing that “good works rather than faith [were] the basis of true religion, both as revealed in Scripture and taught by the experience of all ages and common sense.” He admitted that his ideas on religion were “very general and subject to be moulded to a definite shape by time, circumstances and experience.”

Time, circumstance, or experience never shaped her husband’s religion in the way Ellen would have liked. Sherman never joined the Roman Catholic Church to which she, the Sherman children, and her family belonged.

Sherman rejected Catholicism and other expressions of denominational religion because none of them, in the American context, made any sense to him. He refused to adopt any religion that threatened to limit his communion with family and with other Americans. He wrote to his friend Oliver O. Howard in 1886, five years before his death, saying the Catholic Church demanded “a faith and submission” which he could not in good conscience give, and to ally himself with another church “would create dissension which I hate.” On the other hand, he professed an abundant faith “in the one God, Maker of Heaven and Earth, who can read the hearts of men.” He remained ambivalent toward organized religion for all of his life. However, his messages and letters through the years contained various references to the one God in whom he believed, the same God to whom he entrusted his fate and the fate of the nation.

Sherman's religious beliefs and practice were more a reflection of Robert Bellah’s “civil religion” or what historian Sidney Mead has called the “religion of the Republic.”

2. WTS to Ellen Ewing, 7 April 1842; Howe, Home Letters, 20–21.
lah, is a historical national religion that exists alongside of, but is clearly differentiated from the churches. "More related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love," it is a religion whose God actively participates in history and demonstrates a special concern for America. Similarly, the "religion of the Republic," says Mead, is "essentially prophetic" and can be traced back to the nation's founding. Its God stands in constant judgment over the American people, and provides a source of meaning for all citizens, functioning as a source of social and cultural unity. Sherman believed in God, the transcendence of the American nation, and the prophetic nature of the Civil War. As the war progressed, he theologized about the American social and political order and how the violence of the battlefield related to it.

That others have missed this dimension of Sherman's character and the meaning he gave to the war is not surprising given the decline of what some have called "American Exceptionalism," and the corresponding rise of a cultural cynicism that thwarts our understanding of his sense of American transcendence and the nation's special place in the world. Certainly, Americans' current distrust of the political process and elected officials weighs in here, as does their overzealous preoccupation with individual and group rights. Furthermore, the expansion of the global economy and the corporate manager's trivialization of nationhood and lessening obligation to particular people and places have played no small part in sapping the moral vitality of American institutions. Taken together, these things have tended to diminish a generally recognized cultural consensus that previously had been sustained by what can only be called a religious devotion to certain public symbols, beliefs, and practices in American life. Among other things, the overall result has been an


7. As defined by Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, theology is a "study of God and his relation to the world... a theory or system [related to God and his relationship to the world]; a distinctive body of opinion [related to God and his relationship to the world]."

erosion of national identity, and of a common commitment to the things Americans have held dear.9

Content with citing his rejection of formal religion and his life-long resistance to his wife's Catholicism, none of the scholarship on Sherman, past or present, seriously explores the spiritual basis of his views on citizenship, his leadership of armies, or his rationalization of total war.10 John Marszalek comes closest when he suggests that Sherman demonstrated a passion for order for most of his life. Ultimately, our desire, if not our passion, for ordering the world is theological, and goes to the very center of our souls and the reasons for which we think we exist. However, if Sherman was passionate about social order, then it was order of a particular kind that derived from his faith in the Union and the length to which he would go to act upon it. Nothing else explains why he cared so much about the outcome of the war, or why he did not enlist in the Confederate cause. Certainly the opportunity to instruct an untutored people in the lessons of rule and order was as much with Robert E. Lee as it was with Ulysses S. Grant. Sherman rarely drew the connection between the social disorder that disturbed him and the America he revered. Rather than recognize an independent Confederacy and limit the freedom and mobility of the American people, he prescribed hard lessons about appropriate behavior for a people who would be free and mobile. Rather than acceding to the failure of the great experiment in political democracy, he elevated it to sacred status and vowed to preserve it with his life and the lives of others.

Both Stanley Hirshson and Michael Fellman, two other recent biographers of Sherman, share Marszalek's assumption about the irreligious

9. A Louisiana school board recently voted to change the name of its George Washington Elementary School to Charles Drew Elementary. Cited as justification is the school board's discovery that the "father of our country" owned slaves. Washington, whose name used to be held in some reverence by most Americans, is dismissed as someone whose life did not further the freedom of people around the world, but as someone who inhibited it. Revising Washington's legacy to the nation is one of many recent examples of people appealing to the soul and spirit of Sherman's (or Washington's) America to promote personal and group agendas while simultaneously desacralizing the name and life of public figures who have long symbolized it. The past becomes prologue to various forms of social and institutional oppression rather than to hope and a redeemable human existence. See Transcript, Robert Siegel with Jay Beringer Brechtel (President, Orleans Parish School Board), "School Name Changes," All Things Considered, National Public Radio, 12 November 1997.

Sherman. Rather than a "passion for order," however, the themes of Sherman's life were frustration, anxiety, and rage. Both portray Sherman as one whose troubled personal life dragged him down until the day he died. In their minds, he was a near emotional cripple who was unable to loose himself from the debilitations of family and the humility of a failed past. He was a man trapped by psychology and harassed by pestering goblins that roamed freely in his mind.

Hirshson describes Sherman as a "brilliant but tormented soul" whose troubles began the day he realized "that mental instability plagued his mother's family." The White Tecumseh is a study of a man who "knew much sadness and only occasional happiness." His sad and unhappy disposition showed itself in just about everything Sherman did. Professor Marszalek, Hirshson argues, "never even begins to prove his thesis" that Sherman exhibited a soldier's passion for order. In fact, states Hirshson, few American generals lived a more "confused and disorderly" life than Sherman. However confused and disorderly Sherman's life may have been, Hirshson's critique derives from a serious misreading of Marszalek's book. Marszalek's precise point is that Sherman's passion for order emerged from the disorder afflicting his life and the life of the nation. What Hirshson may have meant to say was that Sherman's life exhibited less a passion for order than it did for disorder. If that was his intention, then he may have a point. One could conceivably argue that Sherman's penchant for sowing disorder outweighed his concern for bringing order to society. Sherman, himself, persisted in seeing a relationship between levels of destructiveness and disorder and an aching desire for social stability and order—the harder the war, the more painful the ache. One would beget the other. His theology of the battlefield, worked out in the course of the war, is faithful testimony to that proposition. 11 His intention, though, was always to draw order out of chaos and destruction, and he was, as John Marszalek rightfully attests, passionate about it.

Fellman's Sherman was unhappy, too, but he was also intensely angry, bursting at the seams with pent up rage. Citizen Sherman is a biographical journey to the "origins of Sherman's rage" to understand how the general's "deeply felt and intentionally expressed anger" made him hell-bent on using the war to redeem himself at the expense of the Southern people. 12 If Hirshson is confused on the issue of order, Fellman is not. Clearly, Sherman's disorderly mind was intent on dismantling the world around him. His life of bitter disappointment and related rage allowed for little else. In Fellman's mind, the Union general was a dangerous and unstable man whose rage reflected the darker side of the

12. Ibid.; Fellman, Citizen Sherman, ix-x.
American character. Where Hirshson, at least, sees brilliancy of command and lasting contributions to military professionalism, Fellman sees unjustifiable state-sponsored violence, a virulent racism and anti-Semitism, and an angry and unfaithful husband who exhibited some of the signs of an aging sexual predator.

Significant also is the ease with which Fellman dismisses Sherman’s religious beliefs. Where Sherman saw hope, purpose, and redemption in war and triumphant Unionism, Fellman sees a “great morality play” and a cover for the destructiveness of war and Sherman’s angry and excessive behavior. Fellman, for example, sees nothing redemptive in Sherman’s racism, no hope for the future, and no hope for making African-Americans a part of the greater American community. His “assumptions about the inferiority of the whole race of blacks that fitted them for slavery,” states Fellman, tied neatly to his forceful arguments for slavery and against emancipation. 13 While there is no necessary relationship between racism and one’s position on slavery or emancipation, Fellman argues otherwise; because Sherman was a racist, he was also proslavery and against emancipation. Sherman may have been a racist, but he did not persist in proslavery arguments or impede the emancipation process. In pursuit of Sherman’s irredeemable racism, Fellman sometimes forgets that he fought for the Union, an idea that had deep and meaningful significance for him, and was more opposed to Southern slave holders than he was to slaves and the slave system.

Much of the problem here is Fellman’s failure to make critical distinctions between Sherman’s racism and his concern for the conduct of effective military operations. In a September 1862 letter to his brother John, Sherman confesses the logistical difficulty of providing and caring for the significant number of fugitive slaves flocking to Union lines. According to Sherman, they represented a “horrible impediment” to advancing armies. Fellman interprets Sherman’s uneasiness about the fate of the cause and the fighting edge of his army as evidence of racial insensitivity, a proslavery position, and opposition to emancipation. Similarly, Fellman sees signs of Sherman’s racism in a letter to General Grant where he says he thought it not in the Union’s best interest “to set loose negroes too fast.” This letter, written one day after his note to John, was also about military expediency and fugitive slaves rather than about his views on slavery or emancipation.14 Presumably, the logistical burden of caring for fugitive slaves was roughly equal to the logistical burden of

13. Ibid., 339, 155.
looking after prisoners of war, who, until the last few months of the war, were exchanged to relieve commanders of the responsibility for guarding, transporting, feeding, housing, and medically caring for them.

The worst example of Fellman's misreading of the evidence is from a 12 November 1862 letter in which Sherman is chastising a Memphis judge for attempting to enforce Tennessee slave law in a district under Federal control, laws that were in contradiction to congressional mandate concerning emancipation. Sherman believed the judge could make better use of his time than using his court to bill the Federal government for employing fugitive slaves of local slave owners. With Union bayonets "glistening at each street corner," wrote Sherman, a Tennessee county court was not the place to adjudicate the states rights issue. Sherman advised Judge Swayne (not Sawyer as Fellman notes) to respect the laws of Congress, including emancipation, and "reserve this question of slavery, this dire conflict between National and State authority" to be settled by the armies now arrayed for the purpose.\textsuperscript{15}

Fellman interprets the Judge Swayne letter as further evidence of Sherman's opposition to emancipation, long after Congress and President Lincoln had settled the matter. To arrive at this conclusion, he ignores the full text of the letter and juxtaposes sentences to have Sherman continuing "to plan to 'reserve this question of slavery,' while Northern and Southern armies fought out the real and 'dire conflict between National and State authority.'"\textsuperscript{16} Instead of resisting emancipation and supporting slavery in this letter, as Fellman claims, Sherman is actually upholding a congressional mandate and admitting the war is about settling the slave question as well as the states rights issue once and for all.

With the outcome of war still in the balance, Sherman's concerns about using the war and his armies to eradicate slavery and resolve longstanding race issues were not unreasonable. He resented and resisted the political intention to use his armies as laboratories for social reform and experimentation. Apart from his racism, he was an extremely competent commander of troops who understood the requirements for maintaining soldier morale, unit integrity, and winning battles. However, he did not, contrary to Fellman, oppose on principle the abolition of slavery or the emancipation of black Americans. With the future of Unionism at stake, he was the first to subordinate politics to the effective prosecution of the war. Although he frequently used the same argument to excuse the war's excessive violence, Sherman knew, as did anyone else fighting for the cause of Union, that losing the war meant losing the blood sacrifice of


\textsuperscript{16} Fellman, \textit{Citizen Sherman}, 153.
countless American soldiers as well as the Union intent to drive slavery from the continent. Nothing was accomplished if the Union lost the war to an independent slave-holding Confederacy. Sherman consistently put his fervent belief in Unionism, the Constitution, and winning the war before all things.

Moved by the war and the problems of disorder and disunion, Sherman became one of the most influential nineteenth-century proponents of a commonly understood American civil religion applicable to a broad range of individuals and groups in an increasingly complex and diverse society. For Sherman, the Civil War was the defining moment of the American experience, setting limits on American freedom and tolerance, laying out the measure of American citizenship, and providing the common ground upon which all citizens could stand in celebration of their commitment to the nation and to one another. Sherman's civil religion emerged in the maelstrom of a war that demanded from its participants a lasting explanation for the terrible sacrifice being made in its name.

By war's end, Sherman believed the sanctity of the Union and winning the war had become more important than the manner in which it was conducted. He had become noticeably detached from the violence, and had begun to see the war as a phenomenon of nature, operating according to its own laws and with a momentum and direction all its own. He had moved from a theology of God-given moral absolutes to one marked by the relative movement of God's unseen and mysterious hand taking his people in directions and towards ends not clearly seen or understood by them. He demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice moral principle, and, in some cases, the Bill of Rights, on the altar of a new and emerging social order that he believed would give rise to a greater degree of American unity and a widening commitment to the nation and its future. Ultimately, the war left Sherman with a religion empty of content, grounded in his reverence for the nation, but without a compelling need to think much about where its people had been or to worry too much about where they were going. All that mattered was that fellow citizens learn the art of drifting in the stream of divine intention as it flowed into the ages. This is not to say that Sherman did not understand his nation's past or care about its future, quite the contrary. No one knew it better, or cared more. The point is there was nothing in his wartime thought that required him to do so. Set adrift from the spiritual moorings that gave it depth and substance, his was a worldview destined to lose its way in the uncharted waters of time and change.

Like many leading lights of his time, Sherman professed a profound faith in the divine origins and destiny of the American nation. In 1860, as the South was contemplating secession and disunion, he expressed confidence that the nation would be "preserved through the efforts of good men north & south." God had destined the United States, said
Sherman, "for a long and prosperous nation life, & not for destruction in the bloom of its youth." In the summer of 1860, he credited "the Almighty in His Wisdom" for visiting drought on large sections of the south and showing near "wasteful abundance" on the north as illustration of "the mutual dependence of one part of our magnificent country on the other." After Lincoln's election in November, he vowed to "do no act, breathe no word, think no thought hostile to the Government of the United States," and to remain loyal to the idea of union "as long as a single state is true to the old Constitution." 17

The spiritual strength Sherman took from the broadest possible notion of American citizenship extended logically from his belief that man's nature destined him to seek his identity through geographic mobility and free and unfettered movement from one's place of origin. He once told Ellen that a man could never be "a prophet in his own land . . . nature for some wise purpose, maybe to settle the wild lands, does ordain that man shall migrate, clear out from the place of his birth." In a very deep sense, this was the America that Sherman cherished, a nation that promised opportunity through mobility. He liked the idea of man cut loose from his roots, free to travel from one end of the continent to the other in search of himself and a new and better life. Later in life he would bemoan the fact that his eldest son had closed himself off from the "great future of America" by becoming a Catholic priest, something he thought "antagonistic to [his] ideas of right." His sense of American community derived not from a personal commitment to those nearest him, but from the larger nation and the seemingly endless opportunity to define oneself outside the constraints of family, town, or village. He was a self-admitted wanderer who "never cared much whether my abode was in Wall St., San Francisco, in the Desert, in Kansas or Ohio." 18

For Sherman, the Mississippi River and its tributaries were God's "natural avenue" connecting the various parts of the country, providing the outlet for individual opportunity and through which the boundless energy of the American people flowed. As he explained to Henry Halleck during the war, "the Valley of the Mississippi is America." People living along the Monongahela, Illinois, Minnesota, Yellowstone, and Osage had

17. WTS to Philemon B. Ewing, 17 December 1860, quoted in Marszalek, Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order, 136; WTS to George Mason Graham, 12 August 1860, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Ind.; WTS to George M. Graham, Seminary, Christmas 1860; and WTS to John Sherman, 16 January 1861, in Walter L. Fleming, ed., General Sherman as a College President (Cleveland: Arthur L. Clark, 1912), 317–18, 341.

as much interest in its security as did those in Mississippi and Louisiana. The river belonged to all Americans. No one section of the country had a right to limit its navigation to the detriment of the others who also depended upon it. With its security continually threatened, he remained sensitive to its plight throughout the war. Although he found himself "thundering away at Atlanta" in July 1864, he told Henry Slocum he did so as representative of "the great valley . . . the spinal column of America." War, factionalism, and disorder threatened to close the Mississippi, sever the mystic bonds of nationhood, and limit the movement of a free people.19

Sherman held on to this transcendental view of the American nation for the rest of his life. Fourteen years after the war, he wrote to a New Orleans newspaper editor philosophizing about the political and geographical sources from which Americans should gain their identity. The "whole is greater than a part," said Sherman, "and is worthy of more respect and affection." Since one's place of birth was accidental, something over which people had no control, he thought prideful attachment to "the spot where one is born" was misdirected. "Every American," he surmised, "should be proud of his whole country rather than a part." He then went on to describe the city of New Orleans as the root of a tree whose branches formed by the Mississippi River stretched to the beautiful fields of western New York and to the majestic canyons of the Yellowstone. "With every draught of water," wrote Sherman, the city took "the outflow of the pure lakes of Minnesota and the dripping of the dews of the Alleghany and Rocky Mountains."20 America was God's grand design spread fully across the sprawling North American continent, and he belonged to all of it.

Sherman enjoyed such immense popularity as commander of Union armies because he so perfectly reflected the soul of the nation that most of his soldiers had gone to war to recover. His men loved him for the informality of his leadership, and for his refusal to stand on ceremony. His clothing was as informal as the rest of him. At times it was easy to mistake him for the private he would just as soon talk with as one of his officers. He commanded one of the most powerful armies in the world, but he became "Uncle Billy" to many of his soldiers. He was one of the boys who just happened to be in charge. He made few attempts to cut himself out of the crowd, and he seemed to use his authority only when it mattered most, and when it best served the interests of his men, his armies, and their appointed mission. His common manner and deference

to the egalitarian character of his armies endeared him to all his soldiers. His men admired him for his and their success, but also for the fact he did not break connection with them and flaunt it. It was a part of Sherman that enabled him to command, as he put it, “the soul of his men, as well as their bodies and legs.”²¹ He was from Ohio, but he could have been from anywhere, relating equally well to men from Minnesota or Missouri. One officer described him as the “most American looking man” he ever saw. What his men saw in him, he saw in them, enforcing at all times the notion that his soldiers were Americans rather than citizens of particular states or regions of the country.²²

Like all religions, Sherman’s informed him of right and wrong and imbued him with a sense of the sacred that imposed itself on his actions. His religious sensibilities, then, were directly connected to the maintenance and survival of the American social order that transcended life itself. “On earth, as in heaven, man must submit to an arbiter,” said Sherman. “He must not throw off his allegiance to his government or his God without just reason and cause. The South had no cause.” He looked upon the Confederacy as a community of heretics who threatened to destroy the source of his religious inspiration. “Satan and the rebellious saints of Heaven,” he concluded, “were allowed a continuous existence in hell merely to swell their just punishment. To such as would rebel against a Government so mild and just as ours was in peace, a punishment equal would not be unjust.”²³

Sherman extended no sympathy to those who would break the law and upset the natural order of things. For him, the legislated law of representative government, having replaced the divine rule of monarchs, was sacred. “The law is or should be our king,” he said, “we should obey it, not because it meets our approval but because it is the law and because obedience in some shape is necessary to every system of civilized government.” When the great political questions of his time produced disorder, he dismissed them as “that political nonsense of slave rights, States Rights, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and such other trash as have deluded the Southern people into war, anarchy,


and bloodshed." As far as he was concerned, freedom of speech and freedom of the press had become "precious relics of former history." Law and order and the stability of a blessed society took precedence over the abstract principles of constitutional government.

Sherman consistently viewed disunion as symptomatic of a larger problem with American political culture—the general tendency toward anarchy and disintegration. As the South edged towards secession, he asserted the disaffected states would "not escape the very danger at which they grow so frantically mad." In the not so distant future, he predicted, "the same confusion and disorder will arise, and a new dissolution, till each state and maybe each county will claim separate independence." From his pre-war post as superintendent of Louisiana State Seminary, he warned that if Louisiana joined in the " unhallowed movement to dismember our old government," it would only be a matter of time before the "the parishes and people insult and deride her." Slavery was not the problem that threatened political order, he surmised, but the "tendency to anarchy everywhere. I have seen it all over America," he wrote, "and our only hope is in Uncle Sam." Something had to be done to impress upon the American people "that the United States is a reality." 25

After subduing Vicksburg, Mississippi, in summer, 1863, Sherman wrote to his brother, Ohio Senator John Sherman, elaborating further on the incoherence of American politics:

There are about six millions of men in this country all thinking themselves sovereign and qualified to govern. Some thirty-four governors of States who feel like petty kings and about ten thousand editors who presume to dictate to generals, presidents, and cabinets. I treat all these as nothing, but when a case arises I simply ask: Where is the law. 26

Society drifted toward anarchy if violations of the law went unchecked, and anarchy, thought Sherman, was abhorrent to nature and therefore to God. To prevent it, authorities had the duty to call upon the military to exercise its "rightful, constitutional, and lawful" authority over those who threatened the peace of the community. "In our country,


25. WTS to Ellen Sherman, 10 November 1860; WTS to George M. Graham, Seminary, Christmas 1860; WTS to D. F. Boyd, 23 February 1861; WTS to Ellen Sherman, 1 February 1861, in Fleming, General Sherman as a College President, 306, 318, 366, 360.

he continued, "personal liberty has been so well secured that public safety is lost sight of in our laws and constitutions . . . and will go straight to anarchy and the devil if somebody don't arrest our downward progress."27

War, in this regard, thought Sherman, became the great teacher, reviving virtues "lost sight of in time of peace. . . . God in his wisdom," he told Ellen, may have wanted to remind the contestants in this war "that they are of the same frail materials of mortality as the other thousand millions of human beings that spin their short webs and die all over earth."28 Two years into the conflict he began to view the war as an opportunity "to impress upon the population the truth that they are more interested in civil government than we are." He believed people from all parts of the country "had been undergoing a salutary political schooling, learning lessons which might have been taught all by the history of other people." However, the "conceit" of the American people condemned them to learning the truth for themselves. Citizens from even the smallest of localities had convinced themselves that their concerns were superior "to the aggregated interest of the whole nation." The war, said Sherman, had "exploded that notion," and even if nothing more were gained, the experience, "though dear, would be worth the expense."

Coupled with his belief that the constitutional guarantees of states rights, and the freedoms of speech, press, and conscience were passing into the dustbin of history, he could say the war was bringing something new into view. "Obedience to law," he wrote, "is the lesson that this war, under Providence, will teach the free and enlightened American citizen."29 For his part, Sherman believed the rebelliousness of the Confederacy was an example of a good thing taken to its extreme and that he had been sent among the people of the South to teach them restraint and give them lasting lessons in republican government.

Sherman was hardly alone among his peers in his concern for the incipient instability of the social order, and his belief that something should be done to harmonize the discordant and seemingly dissonant voices of nineteenth-century America. Many of the same people who spoke reverently about the God-given rights of free Americans also worried publicly about their excesses. Quite willing to assign people to the forced regimentation and confinement of the asylum, the schoolroom, or Sunday school class for repeated drill on approved standards of morality and public behavior, he and other leading citizens of the time were driven by a need to impose the perfect peace and serenity of a Currier and

28. WTS to Ellen Sherman, 10 April 1863, in Howe, Home Letters, 249.
Ives print on the lives of their fellow citizens.\textsuperscript{30} Sherman was unique in this respect, since he believed the war would provide many of the same socializing benefits as other emerging institutions devoted to disciplining the population and teaching respect for law and public order.

After four years of thinking about them, Sherman imposed his arguments on the mayor of Atlanta after occupying that city in September 1864. "If the United States submits to division now," he wrote, "it will not stop, but will go on until we reap the fate of Mexico, which is eternal war." Sherman believed the war to be the ultimate test of national resolve "to establish its authority." If the government failed the test, or relaxed "one bit to pressure, it [would be] gone." People might honestly disagree about the nature of that authority, but the "national feeling . . . always [came] back to that of Union." By the time of his triumphant march into the Georgia capital, he had concluded that the necessity of restoring order to the land gave the United States the right "to take every life, every acre of land, every particle of property, every thing that to us seems proper." Union armies would not let up until the authority of the government was reestablished. All who did not aid him in that cause were his enemies, and he would "not account to them for our acts." If the people of the South continued to oppose him, they did so at their peril, forfeiting all rights "to immunity, protection, or share in the final results."\textsuperscript{31} Sherman had come to believe the enemy had no rights except for those he chose to allow.

He had not come to this position easily, and only after first learning that southern rebelliousness was rooted much deeper than he and others had previously figured. Those lessons came early in the war after he drew occupation duty in Memphis, Tennessee. Guerrilla soldiers who persistently attacked Union boats traveling the Mississippi River eventually compelled him to destroy Randolph, Tennessee, and threaten to expel families "from the comforts of Memphis, whose husbands and brothers go to make up those guerrillas." In October 1862, he issued orders to expel ten families for every boat fired upon by guerrilla Confederates and had his provost marshal draw up a list of thirty names from


which ten would be drawn with the report of the first attack.\textsuperscript{32} The attacks ceased for a time, but when they resumed in mid-October, he ordered the removal of some of the city's residents and sent one of his regiments to destroy all houses, farms, and crops along a fifteen-mile stretch of the Mississippi River south of Memphis. To a lady petitioner from Memphis who questioned his treatment of the locals, Sherman told her that God himself had "obliterated whole races from the face of the earth" for sins less heinous, and unless Confederate leaders disavowed these guerrilla acts of cowardice, she would soon see "how rapidly civil war corrupts the best feelings of the human heart."\textsuperscript{33}

That same month, Sherman warned his brother John that "after eighteen months of war the enemy is actually united, armed, and determined, with powerful forces well handled, disciplined and commanded on the Potomac, the Ohio, the Missouri. . . . The South has united people and as many men as she can arm." Union armies, wrote Sherman, continued to pass through the land, but the war "closes in behind and leaves the same enemy behind." He feared the people of the north did not understand what he and his soldiers were up against and, like him, would have "to unlearn all their experience of the past thirty years and be born again before they will see the truth."\textsuperscript{34} Sherman's own born-again experience had left him knowing he was at war with the whole of the Confederacy—the soldier who held the rifle as well as the civilian who headed local governments, farmed the fields, managed the factories, and operated the railroads. After Memphis, he occasionally made reference to the grim necessity of exterminating the entire people of the South.\textsuperscript{35} In his mind, to not see the war for what it really was only strengthened the Confederate cause and prolonged its agony. Once Sherman discovered the true extent of southern disorderliness, he broadened the scope of his tactics and began directing the war at Confederate civilians and the things they held dear. The war, he surmised, did not begin with the Confederate army, nor would it end there.

As Sherman began warring on civilians in and around Memphis, he continued to proclaim their rights and that some things were as wrong or right in wartime as they were in peace. Aware of growing complaints


\textsuperscript{33} WTS to Ulysses S. Grant, 9 October 1862, ibid., 260–62, 273; Special Orders No. 283, 18 October 1862, ibid., 280–81; WTS to P. A. Fraser, 22 October 1862, ibid., 288; WTS to Valeria Hurlbut, 7 November 1862, ibid., 860.

\textsuperscript{34} WTS to John Sherman, 1 October 1862, in Thorndike, \textit{Sherman Letters}, 165–66.

about pillaging and straggling, he issued a lengthy reminder of the seriousness of the offenses. Pillaging and straggling, said Sherman, "had always been great military crimes," and he was committed to enforcing both the moral law and the legislated laws of Congress. God himself, said Sherman, had commanded:

"Thou shall not kill," "thou shalt not steal," "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods," etc. Will anyone say these things are not done now as well as before these laws were announced at Sinai? I admit the law to be that "no officer or soldier of the United States shall commit waste or destruction of cornfields, orchards, potato-patches, or any kind of pillage on the property of friend or foe near Memphis," and that I stand prepared to execute the law as far as possible.36

Still alarmed by the "indiscriminate and extensive plundering" of his men, he established policy on the matter. The Union army's mission, he insisted, was "to maintain, not to violate, all laws, human and divine."37

Afterwards, however, Sherman began distancing himself from both the age-old military law condemning pillaging and straggling and what he had previously referred to as moral or divine law. In January 1863, he lamented the destruction that attended the progress of Union armies. "Farms disappear, houses are burned and plundered, and every living animal killed and eaten. General officers," he confessed, "make feeble efforts to stay the disorder, but it is idle." In May, he again complained about the unintended devastation marking the path of Federal armies. He was no longer opposed to burning fences for firewood or commandeering "corn, bacon, ham, or mules to support the army," but continued to curse stragglers who roamed behind Union armies disgracing "our cause and country." He and his fellow officers detested the "universal burning and wanton destruction of private property," and felt it was "not justified in war."38 By September of that year, he had resigned himself to the fact that he could not control the urge to violence and revenge among the undisciplined elements of his army. What he earlier had thought detestable had become grounded in war's very nature. In war, he wrote, "you can't help yourselves, and the only possible remedy is to stop war." From that time on, he saw that his duty was not "to build up, [but] to destroy both the rebel army and whatever of wealth or property it has founded its boasted strength upon."39

For Sherman, the battlefield was quickly becoming a place that evinced little or no evidence of God's saving grace, and the only way to end the spreading violence was to stop the war. The cause of war remained sacred, but the brutal means and methods associated with it were anything but. If the prosecution of the war retained any redeeming virtue, it lay solely in its potential to teach people the necessity of social order by spoon feeding them a heavy dose of what it was like without it.

While Sherman was away on his raid to Meridian, Mississippi, his adjutant, Major R. M. Sawyer, remained at the headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama. Sherman wrote Sawyer in late January 1864 giving guidance on the "treatment of inhabitants known or suspected to be hostile or 'Secesh.'" Sherman advised "gentleness and forbearance" to those who submitted to the rightful authority of Union armies, but "to the petulant and persistent . . . death is mercy, and the quicker he or she is disposed of the better." Sherman figured that people who insisted on pushing war "beyond a certain limit ought to know the consequences." Warring people of history who had shown less pertinacity than the South had been "wiped out of national existence." Sounding more like a religious prophet than a military commander, he then instructed Sawyer to gather together the better citizens of northern Alabama and read them the letter "so as to prepare them for my coming."40 Some years later he would describe his methods by quoting scripture: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Hence, his aim was to humble rebel pride, "to follow them to their inmost recesses, and make them fear and dread us."41

After Sherman's accommodation to the seemingly uncontrollable dimensions of the war's violence, he began disregarding the "moral law," if he thought it would gain him success and bring the war closer to an end. After backing up Confederate forces against the outer reaches of Atlanta in August 1864, Sherman admitted to Henry Halleck that he was "too impatient for a siege" and had sent for two thirty-pound Parrots with which his artillerists could "pick out almost any house in town." He pledged to Halleck that whether Union forces got inside Atlanta or not, it would be "a used-up community" by the time he was done with it.42 With the arrival of the guns, Union artillerists began firing over the heads of John Bell Hood's defending Confederates into the town's residential districts, and continued to do so for almost three weeks. Inferring he still respected the moral law that protected the innocent from the ravages of war, Sherman would later blame the death and maiming of unarmed civilians on Hood for defending the city "on a line so close to town that

41. Sherman, Memoirs, 2: 249.  
every cannon-shot and many musket-shots... that overshot their mark, went into the habitations of women and children.”

Hood renounced the charge and accused Sherman of not giving notice of his intention to shell the town, the usual practice in war among civilized nations. The Confederate commander further claimed to know “a hundred thousand witnesses” who could testify that Sherman’s artillery fired for weeks into the homes of women and children located “far and above and miles beyond my line of defense.” Hood had observed Sherman’s proficient artillerists too long to believe they had “unintentionally fired too high for my modest field-works, and slaughtered women and children by accident and want of skill.”

One of the witnesses to whom Hood referred was war correspondent David P. Conyngham. Conyngham, who rode with Sherman’s armies, graphically described the destruction of private dwellings in Atlanta. “The city,” he wrote, “had suffered much from our projectiles. Several houses had been burned, and several fallen down... Few houses escaped without being perforated.” One unidentified woman told Conyngham of a shell that passed through her house as she was sitting down to dinner. The shell came in one end of her home, knocked over the dinner table, and exited through the other. Unfortunately, the projectile still had enough momentum to drive into the interior of the house next door and kill her neighbor. Every yard and garden had a deep and well-covered cave or “bomb proof.” When artillery shells exploded near the entrance to these caves, explained Conyngham, the unfortunates sheltered inside had been buried alive.

When Episcopal Bishop Henry Lay visited Sherman’s Atlanta headquarters, Sherman repeated his claim that Hood’s line of defense lay too close to the city, and the shelling of the residential district had been unintended. Bishop Lay, inside the city throughout the siege, seemed dismayed at Sherman’s reasoning. “The shells fell everywhere,” said Lay, “the hottest fires I had been in was at private houses; shells struck St. Philip’s Church nearby and passed over the city.” Sherman replied that his artillerists “could not help it. They had only the range and the smokestack of the railroad and could not see the effect of shot.”

43. WTS to John Bell Hood, 10 September 1864, ibid., vol. 39, pt. 2, 416.
44. John Bell Hood to WTS, 12 September 1864, ibid., 419–22.
After taking Atlanta that September, Sherman ordered the mayor to evacuate the city in what he called "the interest of the United States." The directive raised immediate protests from Hood and Mayor James M. Calhoun. Sherman, unmoved by the protestations, told the mayor that the order was "not designed to meet the humanities of the case" and that "the use of Atlanta for warlike purposes [was] inconsistent with its character as a home for families." He urged the mayor to evacuate his people now when it could be done in an orderly and charitable manner. To wait would only put them at risk of starvation, since the city of Atlanta and the surrounding country would no longer be able to support their needs. "You cannot," said Sherman, "qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war into our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out." 47

Hood, shaken by Sherman's insensitivity, declared the measure unprecedented, transcending "in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war." He protested "in the name of God and humanity," telling Sherman he was expelling from home and hearth the innocent "wives and children of a brave people." Unmoved by Hood's invocation of the deity, Sherman called the evacuation an actual act of kindness, since it removed the families of Atlanta "from scenes that women and children should not be exposed to." He also chastised Hood for appealing to "a just God in such a sacrilegious manner. . . . If we must be enemies," he continued, "let us be men and fight it out as we propose to do, and not deal in such hypocritical appeals to God and humanity." God would judge them both in due time. 48

Thinking Sherman was attempting to give new meaning to old words, the Confederate commander accused Sherman of adding "insult to the injury heaped upon the defenseless" by calling his act one of kindness. Hood insisted it was "real cruelty," and refused to defer to Sherman "in regard to matters between myself, my country, and my God." "[T]he interest of the United States," reasoned Hood, was insufficient reason to disregard "the laws of God and man" and to deny the Lord his proper place in the defense of "justice and right." Furthermore, the Union general would not determine for him whether his "earnest prayer to the Almighty Father" to spare the women and children of the city was either sacrilegious or hypocritical. 49

48. John Bell Hood to WTS, 9 September 1864, ibid., 415; WTS to John Bell Hood, 10 September 1864, ibid., 416.
49. John Bell Hood to WTS, 12 September 1864, ibid., 419–22.
Other than the ongoing debate over the treatment of Atlanta's civilians, the Sherman-Hood exchange is notable also because of the Union commander's insistence that the divinity Hood sought was far removed from matters he had come to believe were utterly profane. It was hypocritical and sacrilegious, thought Sherman, to believe that a just god was close to the kind of business in which he and Hood were engaged. The battlefield was not the place to begin appealing for divine intervention. The war itself was God's judgment upon his people, and the judgment was just. For Sherman, mortal man had no other choice but to accept it and abide the consequence until God chose to bring it to a fitting and merciful end. In short, it did not matter to Sherman whether the evacuation of Atlanta was unprecedented, cruel or kind, moral or immoral; it was simply what the war had wrought, and the people of Atlanta would have to live with it.

Sherman is best remembered for his blunt and unadorned description of war as "all hell," but it was not his favorite metaphor to convey his view of the battlefield.\(^50\) As Sherman emptied the acts of war of their moral content, he began likening it to nature's thunderstorm with its dark and ominous clouds of deadly and destructive lightning over which he had no control. When the thunderbolt of war came hurtling down upon the people of the earth, it did not ask about the identity of its victims nor care about their innocence or guilt. It obeyed its own laws and resisted the efforts of ordinary men to bring it under control. He said as much to Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana, just prior to the beginning of the Atlanta Campaign in April 1864. "To make war," argued Sherman, "we must and will harden our hearts. Therefore when preachers clamor, and sanitaries wail don't join in, but know that war, like the thunderbolt, follows its laws, and turns not aside even if the beautiful, the virtuous and charitable stand in its path."\(^51\)

In August of that year, he advised his friend James Guthrie in Louisville not to apologize for the fact that war's inevitable result was to visit pain, misery, and inconvenience on the people subjected to it. "You might as well reason with a thunderstorm," he said. War was the remedy the South had chosen to settle the dispute, and "I say let us give them all they want; not a word of argument, not a sign of letup, no cave in till we are whipped or they are." The only principle involved as far as he was concerned was "which party can whip. It's as simple as a schoolboy's fight," he continued, "and when one or the other party gives in, we will be the better friend." At the campaign's conclusion, Sherman again drew

50. WTS, Address to the Grand Army of the Republic Convention (G.A.R.), Columbus, Ohio, 11 August 1880.
upon the metaphor, when Mayor Calhoun pleaded with him to revoke the order to depopulate the city. Sherman told him he "might as well appeal against the thunder-storm as against these terrible hardships of war." They were inevitable, and the only way the people of Atlanta could hope once more to live in peace was to stop the war.\textsuperscript{52} For Sherman, the laws of nature were at work in the Georgia city and neither he nor the mayor could do anything about them.

Taken literally, Sherman's metaphor reduced his accomplishments to an unflattering and passive willingness to ride out the storm. Anyone could have done the same simply by attaching himself to the furious and uncontrollable burst of energy that swept hard over the South. A war that followed its own laws, imposing itself over the best intentions of its participants, also relieved him of any responsibility for his own actions. When he had doubts about them, he blamed the death and destruction on the enemy whom he believed had drawn the thunderbolt of war to them in the first place. At Marietta, Georgia, the courthouse caught fire three different times. As Union troops doused the flames for the third time, Sherman rode upon the scene with his aide, Major Henry Hitchcock. Hitchcock told his commander that the courthouse could not be saved. Hitchcock recalled Sherman saying there were men who did these things and that it "can't be stopped. . . . Set as many guards as you please, and they will slip in and set fire. The Court House was put out—no use. I dare say the whole town will burn, at least the business part of it. I never ordered the burning of any dwelling—didn't order this, but it can't be helped. I say Jeff Davis burnt them." Hitchcock said he was anxious that Sherman "not be blamed for what [he] did not order." The Union general's matter-of-fact reply must have put Hitchcock more at ease. "Well," said Sherman, "I suppose I'll have to bear it."\textsuperscript{53}

In February 1865, Sherman passed blame to the townspeople of Columbia, South Carolina, for the flames that engulfed their city shortly after the Union Army occupied it. As Sherman walked among the burning buildings, he remarked to the Reverend A. Toomer Porter how irresponsible it had been for the Governor of South Carolina to have evacuated the city only to leave a depot of liquor for his army to find. "Your Governor," said Sherman, "refused to have it destroyed as it was private property, and now my men have got drunk and have got beyond

\textsuperscript{52} WTS to James Guthrie, 14 August 1864, O.R., series I, vol. 39, pt. 2, 248; WTS to J. M. Calhoun, 12 September 1864, ibid., 418–19.

my control and this is the result.” As Charles Royster tells the story, he admonished Mayor Thomas Goodwyn on at least two different occasions for the fire that destroyed more than four hundred buildings and had left many of the city’s women and children homeless. As at Marietta, Sherman was unbothered by the thunderbolt that struck Columbia and what he claimed he neither ordered nor could prevent. “Though I never ordered it and never wished it,” he later wrote, “I have never shed any tears over the event, because I believe that it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the War.”

Sherman’s abidance of a war that subjugated combatants to its iron laws applied as much to his own side as it did to the enemy. As Union casualties mounted during the Atlanta Campaign, he began minimizing his personal role in events that marked the progress of his armies against General Joe Johnston’s Confederate forces. Even as he dislodged Johnston from one defensive position after another, he paid a terrible cost. Attempting to maneuver around Johnston’s flanks in late May, he suffered more than 3,000 casualties in three days. After inadvertently ordering Joseph Hooker’s XX Corps to attack into A. P. Stewart’s entrenched division at New Hope Church on May 25, his orders to Oliver O. Howard on May 27 at Pickett’s Mill resulted in the loss of the better part of three brigades in a sorry attempt to locate and turn the Confederate right flank. Scores of soldiers fell in the days following as he dogged the Confederate Army through the dense and hilly terrain of central Georgia. Campaigning in the high heat and humidity of June culminated in his decision to assault the enemy’s heavily fortified entrenchment at Kennesaw Mountain on 27 June. That engagement ended in utter failure, the death of his friend and former law partner, Colonel Dan McCook, and the loss of another 3,000 Union soldiers.

In the context of his disappointment at Kennesaw and a war that grew uglier by the day, Sherman mused about the powerful and omnipresent forces that gripped him and his soldiers as they continued their pursuit of Johnston’s army. War personified as “death and destruction” had descended upon his armies and now stalked their every move. Living in war’s constant shadow had so hardened him that he had begun “to regard the death and mangling of a couple thousand men as a small affair, a kind of a morning dash.” His fortunes, he concluded, were not


his own, but were tied to the "fate of a vast machine" he was "forced to
guide" through the Georgian landscape.56

After the fighting had ended, Sherman continued to invoke the
image of the thunderstorm to describe war's nature. Addressing the gradu-
ating class of West Point in 1876, he recalled that America was "born
in war, baptized in war," and had fought "wars of aggression and
defence." War was not necessarily inhuman, barbarous, or abhorred by
God; it was "only the means to an end, to be judged by the motives and
the events like other human actions." It came among men like one of
nature's clouds, "surcharged with electricity," expelling "its surplus to
the earth in a thunderbolt, striking the just and unjust alike." War was of
"divine origin," figured Sherman, and, try as he may, man could not
escape it. It was God and nature's way of returning "a condition of peace
and repose" to communities torn apart by "prejudice and passion."57

Because the nature of war and the reasons for it were of divine or-
igin, Sherman seldom questioned the methods he employed to fight it.
That he had the power and the permission to proceed by the light of his
own mind was enough. The more the Confederacy resisted, the less
inclined he became to observe prewar standards of common civility and
moral decency. In some sense, Sherman practiced the wartime notion of
graduated response long before the concept was invented, and, as he
reminded his contemporaries, he was prepared to descend into hell if
that became the measure of success and the only road to victory.

Sherman claimed he was not "brutal or inhuman," or the "heartless
Boar" that some had made him out to be.58 His methods, he maintained,
were hard, but were the result of his desire to end the bloodshed and
suffering as quickly as possible. When he went to some length to ensure
the care and comfort of Atlanta's banished civilians, or when he
instructed his staff to leave behind food, shelter, and other provisions
for the needy of Columbia, he found himself compromising his own
ideal of directing "every thought of the mind, every feeling of the heart,
every movement of a human muscle" to the one sole object of "success-
ful war and consequent peace."59 He could talk and act like a cold-

56. WTS to Ellen Sherman, 30 June 1864, in Howe, Home Letters, 295; WTS to
Thomas Ewing, 11 August 1864, ibid., 306.
57. WTS, Address to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy, West
Point, N.Y., 14 June 1876, 26–32.
58. WTS to Ellen Sherman, 11 October 1864, in Howe, Home Letters, 310–11;
59. For the provisions made for the citizens of Atlanta and Columbia, see WTS
to Tyler, 26 September 1864, O.R., series I, vol. 39, pt. 2, 481; Sherman, Memoirs, 2:
129, 286–87; and Lewis, Sherman: Fighting Prophet, 508–9; WTS to Joseph P.
Thompson, 21 October 1864, quoted in Marszalek, Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for
Order, 296.
hearted brute at one moment and extend the hand of Christian charity in another.

He was not as pitiless or uncompromising as his words would have allowed, but his words were a large part of his legacy. People would not soon forget the unyielding determinism of his voice and letters, or his insistence that war allowed for no choices other than his own. "War is war," he would say, "and you can make nothing else of it."60 What mercy Sherman did dispense was tied directly to Confederate acts of contrition. As he explained to Brigadier General R. P. Buckland, "Goodwill of itself is no value in war."61 For those who sought genuine forgiveness, he would forgive. However, he left little doubt as to the ideal state of mind when faced by the challenges of the battlefield.

People were sometimes surprised when he chose to limit the destructiveness of his armies, since his public pronouncements held so few clues as to how he reached such decisions or why he even bothered with them. After laying waste to Georgia during his infamous march from Atlanta to the sea, Sherman drew praise from the grateful citizens of Savannah for his kindly treatment of them.62 "Not withstanding the habits begotten during our rather vandalic march," he wrote Halleck, the men’s behavior had "excited the wonder and admiration of all." To Grant he bragged about the good behavior of his troops. "You would think it Sunday, so quiet is everything in the city. All recognize my army a different body of men than they have ever seen before." One Southern newspaper, confused by the gentler Sherman, suspected that his Savannah policy was "a dangerous bait to deaden the spirit of resistance in other places."63 Little in his published thoughts or reputation, though, committed him to some reasonable measure of restraint or selected acts of compassion. When the violence strayed beyond the moral and ethical boundaries drawn up in his mind or in the minds of his critics, war became like a deadly thunderbolt that ruined who and what it pleased.

Working from Sherman’s softer side, scholars recently have shown reluctance to ascribe total war status to his means and methods.64 They maintain that true total war makes no distinction between taking the

63. WTS to Henry Halleck, 31 December 1864, O.R., series I, vol. 44, 842; WTS to U. S. Grant, O.R., ibid., 841; Richmond Examiner, 7 January 1865, quoted in Lewis, Sherman: Fighting Prophet, 475.
lives of enemy soldiers and those of enemy civilians, and, as Mark Neely has argued, is a war conducted without "scruples or limitations." Although Sherman grew progressively insensitive to the line distinguishing soldiers from civilians, there were identifiable limits to his violence, a point easily overlooked in the context of our total war experience in the twentieth century. However, to say that the Civil War was not total because its severity was most often "directed," as Mark Grimsley has observed, or that it fails the "without scruples or limitations" test is not to appreciate what it became for Sherman and what it has meant for future generations of professional soldiers.65

The Civil War by nineteenth-century standards was total, and, as Sherman recognized, involved the full mobilization of the human and material capital of competing peoples—that whole societies were at war with one another, and that the enemy's fully mobilized human and material capital had become legitimate tactical objectives for the commander in the field. In an often quoted letter of January 1864, Sherman told adjutant Sawyer that the war was not between "kings or rulers through hired armies," but was unique in that it pitted one people against another. "When men take up arms to resist a rightful authority, we are compelled," wrote Sherman, "to use like force." "Like force" included taking, among other things, "the provisions, forage, horses, mules, wagons" belonging to the enemy. It was clearly the Union's "duty and right" to take these things "because otherwise they might be used against us." As for the enemy, they were now subject to the Government of the United States, which had "any and all rights which they choose to enforce the war—to take their lives, their homes, their lands, their

65. Grimsley, _Hard Hand of War_, 174; Neely, "Was the Civil War a Total War?" 11. Interestingly, after Neely cites the _Oxford English Dictionary_ definition of total war as "loosely, a war conducted without scruples or limitations," he leaves out the word "loosely" in his subsequent analysis. The problem with this kind of analysis, as James McPherson has noted, is that the Clausewitzian notion of "absolute war" or "war in the abstract" is used as a definition for total war. (James M. McPherson, _Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War_ [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 67–68.) Clausewitz is clear on the point that absolute war is an ideal, an abstraction used to measure the value of the policy object and the degree of violence required to achieve it. Knowing pure war lived in the realm of the abstract, Clausewitz fashioned his concept of "wars of all degrees" to account for the fact that some policy objects required a greater degree of violence than others. (Carl von Clausewitz, _On War_ [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968], 110, 119–20.) In this sense, World War II called forth a greater degree of violence than the Civil War, blurring the distinction between combatants and noncombatants in a way Civil War commanders never contemplated. It also follows, then, that the Civil War, measured by the Clausewitzian absolute, was not "indiscriminate and all annihilating," but neither was World War II. (Grimsley, _Hard Hand of War_, 174). No war, even the hardest of the modern age, meets the "without scruples or limitations" standard.
everything.” War was “simply power unrestrained by constitution or compact.”

Total war became a necessary dimension of Sherman’s theology of the battlefield. He saw in total war the potential for restoring rightful order to the nation, creating common cause among the American people, and forging a lasting source of spiritual unity among people both north and south. Armed with a clear conscience concerning the nature and direction of the conflict, his conduct of total war in Georgia and the Carolinas came on the prophetic winds of the thunderstorm whose purposes were not fully known, but whose possibilities Sherman welcomed. In April, only days before the beginning of the Atlanta Campaign, Sherman wrote his brother saying the war, though more than two years old, should be considered “fairly begun,” and would “require the conjoined energies of the whole nation to meet the shock this spring.” To make his point, he attached a copy of his January transmission to Sawyer saying it represented “something new and true” and that he would not object to having it published since he thought it “equally applicable to large districts still to be gone over.”

For General Sherman, the Sawyer letter represented new policy and signified a change in the Union’s prosecution of the war. It also satisfied the conditions under which he would conduct total war against the enemy. He sensed the time had finally come when the concentrated energy of the Union would be focused on the military objective of destroying the Confederacy’s ability to sustain the fight. Campaigning in the spring of 1864 was not going to be business as usual. Upon receiving his orders from Grant on April 4, he wrote to Colonel C. B. Comstock saying no time would be lost “in putting my forces in mobile condition.” All Sherman asked was “notice of time, that all over the grand theater of war there shall be simultaneous action.” He saw no reason why a “harmony of action” should not pervade the entire continent. To Grant, he expressed his “infinite satisfaction” in the plan of campaign that directed all Union armies to act in common, “converging on a common center.” Grant’s plan of action, thought Sherman, seemed like “enlightened war.”

Sherman also promised General Grant that he would not “let side issues draw me off from your main plan, in which I am to knock Joe Johnston, and do as much damage to the resources of the enemy as possible.” “Side issues,” as Sherman called them, were all those messy and

70. Ibid.
distracting political concerns that undermined unity of effort and compromised the Union’s ability to wage efficient and effective total war. He would subordinate them to the main task of winning the war and he would encourage others to do the same. In August, as his artillery was pounding away at the interior of Atlanta, Sherman advised his friend Guthrie not to get distracted by “those side issues” of the war that included “niggers, State rights, conciliation, outrages, cruelty, barbarity, bankruptcy, subjugation, &c.” All of them, according to Sherman, were “idle and nonsensical,” and Guthrie need not apologize for them nor should he allow them to divert his focus from the main issue. They reminded Sherman of a time when the Union war effort was “restrained, tied by a deep-seated reverence for law and property,” a time when he would not let his men burn rebel “fence rails for fire or gather fruit or vegetables though hungry.”

Even before the beginning of the Atlanta Campaign, Sherman began insisting, sometimes forcefully, that political considerations be subordinated to the needs of Union armies and the main objective of reducing the Confederacy to military impotency. Cloaking politics behind the curtain of military necessity freed Sherman to define the battlefield as he saw fit. It also excused him from any of the unintended or misdirected severity for which he or his troops were responsible. War as “simply power unrestrained by constitution or compact” did not mean Sherman would fight without scruples or limits, but that he, the commander in the field, would define what those terms meant. If he stood with only one boot in hell, it was because the enemy did not require him to put the other one forward.

As he contemplated his march from Atlanta to the sea, Sherman began crafting a vision of the nation’s future based on the strength and character of his veteran armies and their increasing ability to subordinate southern interests to those of union. His future campaigning in the South would be the embodiment of what he called “fighting in a double sense, first to gain physical results, and next to inspire Respect on which to build up [the] Nation’s Power.” Managed properly, Sherman thought the immense and focused power of Union armies could be used not only to win the war, but to impress upon the people of America and around the world the potential greatness of a nation committed to commonly held aspirations. His warring on the people of Georgia, he told Ulysses S. Grant, would become a demonstration to the world, “foreign and domestic,” that the United States was a power the Confederacy could not

resist. The movements of his armies through the heart of the South would be more like "statesmanship" than war. It overwhelmed him to think of the thousands of people who would look upon his campaign as "proof positive" the North would prevail. Assurances provided by President Lincoln's re-election, coupled with his campaigning in the South, made what he called "a complete logical whole" moving against the impertinence of the Confederate people and their armies. "Even without a battle," he surmised, "the result operating upon the minds of sensible men, would produce fruits more than compensating for the expense, trouble, and risk."

Sherman knew his campaign to win the war would force people, Union or Confederate, to see themselves in the light of a huge national enterprise that dwarfed prewar attachments to smaller and, by comparison, trivial expressions of community—attachments that for him tended to disorder, division, and even disunion. His nation to be would become just like his army—unified and powerful, loyal and committed to a common destiny, and admired by all at home and abroad. His long held conviction regarding the divine connectedness of America's people—North, South, East, or West—provided his justification for going to war, the rationale for the way he fought it, and, ultimately, the basis for reconciliation and reconstruction. Whether from the plains of Kansas or the plantations of South Carolina, the war was God's instrument for bringing this truth to the American people.

In the end, he proved himself more forgiving than his civilian superiors who sought to exact their pound of flesh from the enemy. He tried to make good on his promise to forgive and forget and become the instant friend of the southern people. He had told Mayor Calhoun and the people of Atlanta that with peace and the restoration of the government's authority, they could then call on him for anything, and that he would share with them "the last cracker" and help shield their homes and families "against danger from every quarter." He negotiated the surrender of Confederate armies in April 1865, near Durham Station, North Carolina, and, as he had promised, his terms of peace were lenient, designed to quickly repair the emotional damage of war and rebellion and make the nation whole again. By showing compassion for the vanquished, he had hoped they would retire quietly to their homes, and take with them the knowledge that the nation that caused them to suffer in war also had the heart to forgive them in peace.

Conducting the peace in the same way he conducted the war, Sherman subordinated the fractious and the divisive to the task of healing wounds and restoring wholeness to the nation. His dissatisfaction with an agreement presented him by Confederate officials caused him to draft the terms of peace in his own hand. His demands were few, asking Confederate soldiers to go home and stack their arms; that each man file a written agreement to defer to federal authority once again; that existing state governments be recognized; and that the federal court system be reestablished. In exchange, the federal government would recognize the political rights of all individuals, including “rights of person and property,” and refrain from harassing its former enemies “so long as they lived in peace and quiet” and obeyed the law. The war would end and general amnesty would apply “on the condition of the disbandment of the Confederate armies, the distribution of arms, and the resumption of peaceful pursuits” by the southern people. In their essence, Sherman’s terms simply demanded a promise from the rebellious that, upon returning to the fold, they would behave themselves in the future.

As Sherman had always insisted, the great object of the war was to mend the sacred cloth of American nationhood. Next to that, all other issues were minor. His softearted proposal for peace surprised no one who knew him well. With the Confederacy destroyed and the Union restored, nothing remained but the challenge of rebuilding and strengthening the nation. Unfortunately, the time had long since passed when the Union was fighting for the singular war aim of reunification. His tendency to view war as an extreme form of corporal punishment, an extension of the rod used to punish the unruly child, rather than as an extension of the political will and desire of the state, as Clausewitz would say, did not serve him well in the transition to peace. Much to his utter amazement and bitter disappointment, he was rebuffed for his efforts and publicly humiliated by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and others who sought greater concessions from the defeated Confederacy.

Long after the guns had quieted, Sherman wrote his friend and former subordinate Oliver O. Howard, saying he considered himself fortunate to have “passed through an eventful life filled with deeds of violence and passion, yet retaining a strong hand on the love of my comrades and enemies.” Their campaigning in Georgia and the Carolinas had con-

76. Sherman, Memoirs, 2: 352–54; Sherman’s “Memorandum, or Basis of Agreement” is reprinted in ibid., 357.
77. “War,” wrote Clausewitz, “is a mere continuation of policy by other means. . . . the political view is the object, War is the means, and the means must always include the object in our conception.” On War, 119.
tributed greatly "to our national success: a success which inured to the advantage of the whole human race, and must therefore have been acceptable to a Good God." That same God, he told Howard, would "take good care of the Soldiers who fought for the Right." Assured of American providence and the absolute justness of the cause, he remained in later life as resolute as ever, convinced of the particulars of his war, and the part he played in arresting the demons of disintegration and doubt that so tormented the American soul and the angels standing guard over life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

79. WTS to O. O. Howard, 1 January 1884, Howard Papers, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.
William Tecumseh Sherman, although not a career military commander before the war, would become one of “the most widely renowned of the Union’s military leaders next to U. S. Grant." Sherman, one of eleven children, was born into a distinguished family. His father had served on the Supreme Court of Ohio until his sudden death in 1829, leaving Sherman and his family to stay with several friends and relatives. After the battle of Shiloh, Sherman led troops during the battles of Chickasaw Bluffs and Arkansas Post, and commanded XV Corps during the campaign to capture Vicksburg. At the Battle of Chattanooga Sherman faced off against Confederates under Patrick Cleburne in the fierce contest at Missionary Ridge. William Tecumseh Sherman Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich. Finding aid available online External. William T. Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Ind. Finding aid available online External. Also available as Microfilm Edition of the William Tecumseh Sherman Family Papers, 1808-1891. Project editor Thomas T. McAvoy. Notre Dame, Ind. Bower, Stephen E. "The Theology of the Battlefield: William Tecumseh Sherman and the U.S. Civil War," Journal of Military History 64/4 (October 2000): 1005-1034. LC catalog record. Bowman, S. M. Sherman and His Campaigns: A Military Biography. Contents. Sherman’s Early Years. West Point and Early Military Career. Sherman Before the Civil War. First Battle of Bull Run. Sherman and Grant. Sherman Takes Atlanta. Sherman’s March to the Sea. Sherman’s Post-Civil War Career. Sources. William Tecumseh Sherman was a Union general during the Civil War, playing a crucial role in the victory over the Confederate States and becoming one of the most famous military leaders in U. S. history. The logistical brilliance on fiery display during Sherman’s March to the Sea from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia, then north into the Carolinas, helped end the