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# Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880\*



Lance Janda

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*To robbery, slaughter, plunder they give the lying name of empire;  
they make a desert and call it peace.*

—Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55-117 A.D.)

LIBRARY shelves groan with works pointing to the Civil War as a harbinger of “total war” in its modern form, a kind of macabre prelude to the world wars of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> And if total war refers to technology, they seem to be correct, as the Civil War represents the first mass conflict of the industrial age. Union and Confederate forces became dependent on modern implements like railroads, the telegraph, armored battleships, repeating rifles, and mass-produced weapons and uniforms.<sup>2</sup>

In a more profound way, however, the real significance of the Civil War lies in its tactics, not its technology. The weaponry of total warfare did not originate in the Civil War, and it came to maturity only on the

\* I wish to thank Russell S. Post and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for assistance in preparing this essay.

The following books have been published within the past year, and although they discuss the subject of this paper, they do not challenge the central thesis. Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1889* (University of Alabama Press, 1994); John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (The Free Press, 1993); George S. Pappas, *To the Point: The United States Military Academy 1802-1902* (Praeger, 1993); and William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms; The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (University of Kansas Press, 1994).

1. H. W. Koch, *History of Warfare* (New York: Gallery Books, 1981), 357, 477. Many authors make similar claims.

2. Paul Fussell, ed., *The Norton Book of Modern War* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 17.

Western Front in Europe in 1914. But if "total war" is defined as using "military force against the civilian population of the enemy,"<sup>3</sup> then the Civil War stands as a watershed in the American evolution of total war theory. The application of force against an enemy's noncombatants and resources, the central tenet of total war, had been used since the dawn of civilization when it suited political and military ends. But Union Army commanders were the first in American history to use these tactics on a widespread scale, and they played a crucial role not only in the subjugation of the South, but in the conquest of Native Americans as well. A doctrine that was anathema in 1860 emerged from the Civil War as the weapon of choice on the frontier, and by 1880 total war theory dominated the mainstream of American military thought.

To early Civil War leaders, these destructive tactics seemed revolutionary, for they contradicted codes of behavior developed during the Enlightenment; codes which attempted to spare civilians the travesties of war. Northern commanders, however, faced with a defiance unprecedented in American history, turned to total war because no other strategy held the promise of ultimate victory.<sup>4</sup> As one pillaging soldier explained in South Carolina: "Here is where treason began, and, by God, here is where it shall end!"<sup>5</sup> Union generals did not invent the tactics or the rationale behind total war; these had been present for centuries. But they did rediscover them in their own time, and lent to them vigorous prosecution and eloquent justification. They shaped, and were shaped by these methods, which came to dominate the American practice of war throughout the late 1800s.

Yet historians have devoted little attention to the continuity in tactics and strategy between the Civil War and the frontier wars with Native Americans. Survey histories of "total" or "modern" war theory usually focus on the twentieth century, or connect the Civil War with the Franco-Prussian conflict and World War I. And works on Native American or Civil War campaigns often ascribe to their subjects a uniqueness which allows no comparison. Only a handful recognize that the similarity between methods used to defeat the South and those used against Native Americans was no accident; that Army leaders took lessons from the Civil War and applied them to the frontier.<sup>6</sup> And

3. John Bennett Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (New York: Bobbs Merrill Company, 1973), xii. For purposes of this article, the use of the term "total war" reflects this idea, though it should be remembered the phrase is twentieth century in origin. It does not appear in contemporary accounts of the Civil War.

4. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 150-51.

5. Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 489.

6. Even these accounts usually come within the body of a work devoted to some larger theme, such as the evolution of American strategy since the Revolution. The

because even that small body of literature probes the connection only superficially, a deeper understanding of those "lessons," and their application on the frontier is required.<sup>7</sup>

## I

The nineteenth-century origins and applications of total war theory began with the Union Army, and the trinity of generals who led the North to victory during the Civil War. Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan were not only fervent and eloquent advocates of total war, they were among the most successful commanders of their generation. As victors they defined American military thought and policy for the rest of the century, and each played a key role in the Indian wars from 1865 to 1880, when the refined tactics of total war reached their nineteenth-century zenith. Their careers illustrate the evolution of total war in American military thought, from birth in the Civil War to late nineteenth-century dénouement.

Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan received their formal military training at the United States Military Academy. Although it might seem reasonable to assume the seeds of total war theory were planted during their days at West Point, such was not the case. Instead, their curriculum focused on the study of engineering and fortifications rather than grand strategy or tactics, and reflected Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer's belief that West Point would flourish only if cadets were trained to be useful in nonmilitary ways.<sup>8</sup>

Further, that portion of the curriculum which did focus on the art of war generally mirrored European philosophies, and made no allowance for wars against the resources or civilian population of an enemy. Certainly attacks on resources were implicit objectives of naval blockades

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result is that systematic exploration of the links between frontier and Civil War strategies has not been adequately pursued. See T. Harry Williams, *The History of American Wars From 1745 to 1918* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1981), and Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1988).

7. One author who does touch on the importance of total war on the frontier is Robert Utley. See *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), and *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

8. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 80-81. The early republic held tightly to a fear of standing armies, and critics argued that West Point was created to develop an officer class that might become aristocratic and dominate both the Army and the government. Thayer dissipated these fears by making West Point the major source of qualified engineers in the country. At a time when roads, canals, bridges, and buildings were in short supply, even the harshest critics of West Point admitted that the engineers were needed.

and sieges, for they represented an indirect way of defeating an opposing army. Starving an enemy army of supplies, however, was altogether different from starving civilians, and the restraints that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century states placed on their armies were reflected at West Point.

European leaders had concluded that warfare against noncombatants was morally and ethically wrong. This view was shared by American military thinkers, who announced in the Articles of War of 1806: "Any officer or soldier who shall quit his post or colors to plunder and pillage shall suffer death or other such punishment as shall be ordered by sentence of a general court martial."<sup>9</sup> U.S. Army officers adhered to this philosophy, at least in principle, until the early 1860s. Even as late as April of 1863, the Union Army issued General Order One Hundred, which specifically upheld the notion of sparing civilians the devastation of war. Article Twenty-Two of that order stated:

as civilization has advanced during the last centuries, so has likewise steadily advanced, especially in war on land, the distinction between the private individual belonging to a hostile country and the hostile country itself, with its men in arms. The principle has been more and more acknowledged that the unarmed citizen is to be spared in person, property, and honor as much as the exigencies of war will admit.<sup>10</sup>

There was no inkling of the wholesale destruction that was to follow; indeed, there was dedicated resolution to avoid it.

Some authors argue that the teachings of Dennis Hart Mahan contained early references to total war, and represented a departure from orthodox nineteenth-century theories. Mahan joined the West Point faculty in 1832. A Thayer protégé and an outstanding instructor, he was the primary teacher of engineering and warfare for cadets. Mahan wrote the standard text used in his classes, and included a summary of the strategic ideas of Antoine Henri, Baron de Jomini. Although Mahan differed in many instances with Jomini's teachings, the latter was con-

9. James Reston, Jr., *Sherman's March and Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), xi. These views stemmed from the Enlightenment, which stressed that violence against noncombatants was barbaric and unworthy of modern military forces.

10. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 129 vols. and index (Washington: GPO, 1880-1901), Series Three, 3:150. Hereafter cited as O.R. Union officers (including U. S. Grant) were already experimenting with resource warfare, illustrating the chasm that often exists between doctrine and practice. Still, the order reflects official Army thought, and probably the consensus of *most* Union commanders.

sidered the leading interpreter of Napoleonic warfare and studied by all fourth-year cadets.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Jomini never advocated total war as Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan would later define it in practice. He was conservative, emphasized fortifications, and “abhorred indiscriminate bloodshed.” Jomini even disapproved of “armies living off the country through which they marched,” a tactic that became standard practice during the latter stages of the Civil War.<sup>12</sup> And though Mahan argued that “carrying the war into the heart of the assailants’ country”<sup>13</sup> was critical, there is sparse evidence he ever conceived of systematic warfare against civilians.

Even during Mahan’s tenure, West Point continued virtually to ignore the serious study of warfare by cadets. Few tactics were learned, and drill was kept at a minimum; instructors taught just enough so that cadets could maneuver on the parade ground. The emphasis instead was on mathematics, engineering, and science, with the formal study of tactics and strategy relegated to curricular insignificance. Mahan’s lectures on warfare were crammed within a course on fortifications, which was offered only to seniors and lasted less than a semester.<sup>14</sup> Finally, very few of the principal actors of the Civil War even mentioned Mahan in their memoirs or letters, and none credited him with sparking their notions of total war. There is little reason, therefore, to believe he played any sort of significant role in their embrace of total war concepts.

The American reluctance to involve noncombatants was clearly outlined by Henry Wager Halleck, who went on to become Chief of Staff during the Civil War. A Mahan disciple, Halleck published a number of works during the 1840s which rehashed Jomini and emphasized fortifications. More importantly, he shrank from the idea of armies living off the land or waging war on the general population.<sup>15</sup> Halleck carried these views into his role as Chief of Staff, and they were shared by

11. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 81–82. The dominance of French thought at West Point cannot be overstated. As a fledgling institution, the academy imitated French doctrine for generations. Napoleonic warfare was the model for all cadets to follow, and French was required as a second language. Jomini was considered the leading authority on Napoleon, despite the publication in 1832 of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*. Clausewitz dominates modern Western concepts of war, but was not translated into English until 1873, when the Franco-Prussian War convinced military leaders that French dogma was outdated.

12. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 82.

13. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 181.

14. James L. Morrison, Jr., *The Best School in the World: West Point, the pre-Civil War Years 1833–1866* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986), 47–49, 96–101, 153, and Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, 181.

15. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 82–87.

officers throughout the Union Army. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan found their inspiration elsewhere.

## II

Ultimately, that inspiration stemmed from the nature of the Civil War itself. Bringing the Southern states back into the Union required the complete subjugation of the Confederate people, a fact which Union officers were slow to recognize. There could be no limited peace, no negotiated settlement if the Confederacy had to accept the supremacy of the U.S. Constitution. As nineteenth-century historian Adam Badeau wrote: "It was not victory that either side was playing for, but for existence. If the rebels won, they destroyed a nation; if the government succeeded, it annihilated a rebellion."<sup>16</sup>

Such annihilation required offensive warfare, which was hampered in the early years by ferocious guerrilla activity behind the lines. Guerrillas disrupted Northern supply lines and communications, requiring inordinate numbers of Union troops to be garrisoned in rear areas. Union commanders needed a two-fold strategy to carry the war into Dixie: one that freed them from vulnerable supply lines and which promised to shorten the war by breaking the will of the Southern people. In the early months of fighting, they had none.

Among the first Northern commanders to find his preconceptions of warfare inadequate was John Pope, an early commander of the Union Army of the Potomac. Frustrated by guerrillas who harassed his supply lines, Pope asked President Lincoln in 1862 for limited permission to begin living off the land. Lincoln, also tiring of conciliation and mildness towards the Southern people, authorized Pope to requisition livestock and foodstuffs from civilians.<sup>17</sup> This was mild retribution, however, lasting only a few weeks before Pope was replaced by George B. McClellan.

The Army of the Potomac's new commander frowned upon any kind of warfare directed at civilians. McClellan summed up his views while apologizing to a Virginia gentleman for destruction caused by the Union Army in 1862: "I have not come here to wage war upon the defenseless, upon non-combatants, upon private property, nor upon the domestic institutions of the land."<sup>18</sup>

16. Adam Badeau, *The Military History of U. S. Grant*, 3 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1882), 3: 642-44.

17. General Order No. 5, Headquarters, Army of Virginia, 18 July 1862, in O.R., Series One, 12(pt. 2): 50.

18. McClellan to Hill Carter, Esq., in O.R., Series One, 11(pt. 3): 316. See also George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union, the Soldiers*

Yet while McClellan clung tenaciously to the past, U. S. Grant waged the war of the future in Tennessee and Mississippi, quickly abandoning archaic notions of warfare which seemed at variance with reality. After the war, Grant wrote that his views radically changed after witnessing tenacious Southern resistance at the battle of Shiloh, 6-7 April 1862.

I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest. Up to that time it had been the policy of our army, certainly of that portion commanded by me, to protect the property of the citizens whose territory was invaded, without regard to their sentiments, whether Union or Secession. After this, however, I regarded it as humane to both sides to protect the persons of those found at their homes, but to consume everything that could be used to support or supply armies.<sup>19</sup>

Grant's views on total war began to change after he gauged the depth of Southern resolve and found it so stalwart that new means would be necessary to ensure victory. Grant continued to evolve these ideas, molding them to fit circumstances even during his tenure as Commanding General of the Union Army.

The key, as Grant saw it, was that the destruction of enemy supplies "tended to the same result as the destruction of armies," and he continued the policy throughout the war.<sup>20</sup> It was a policy born of the necessity to completely subjugate an entire people, something no American army had previously been asked to do. Grant correctly saw that no contemporary doctrine answered the question of how to force millions of people, both civilian and military, into submission; yet that was what he and other Union leaders were required to accomplish. His solution was to wage war on resources, molding European tactics to fit American tasks.

These tactics allowed greater freedom of maneuver than ever before, as Grant would demonstrate in the brilliant campaign against Vicksburg. From the first to the nineteenth of May 1863, forces under Grant's command marched 180 miles, fought in five major engagements, split the Confederate forces opposing them, and laid siege to the city of Vicksburg, whose fall in July would signal the end of serious Southern opposition along the Mississippi. The pillar of his campaign was the decision to cut loose from his base of supplies and live off the land,

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*Who Fought It, the Civilians Who Directed It and His Relations to It and to Them* (New York: Webster, 1887), 487-89.

19. U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Webster, 1885), 1:368-69. William T. Sherman, who became the most famous American practitioner of total war, was one of Grant's key subordinates at Shiloh.

20. Grant, *Memoirs*, 1:368-69.



practicing total war against the civilians of the South.<sup>21</sup>

In later orders to subordinates Sherman and Sheridan, Grant would demonstrate his commitment to even harsher forms of warfare. Sherman was to “get into the interior of the enemy’s country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can upon their war resources.”<sup>22</sup> And prior to unleashing Sheridan’s juggernaut upon the Shenandoah Valley in 1864, Grant declared, “If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste.”<sup>23</sup>

If the blast furnace of war produced a Grant cleansed of restraint, it also kindled the righteous fury of William Tecumseh Sherman, whose name would become synonymous with destruction throughout the South. His famous March to the Sea and the March through the Carolinas have become infamous through tales of wanton and complete destruction. These legends have much basis in fact, though ironically Sherman began the Civil War convinced of the need for law and order. His transformation in 1862 was similar to Grant’s, as he explained to a friend in 1864.

I would not let our men burn fence rails for fire or gather fruit or vegetables though hungry. . . . We at that time were restrained, tied by a deep-seated reverence for law and property. The rebels first introduced terror as part of their system. . . . Buell had to move at a snail’s pace with his vast wagon trains. . . . Bragg moved rapidly, living on the country. No military mind could endure this long, and we were forced in self-defense to imitate their example.<sup>24</sup>

Sherman thus argued that the switch to more brutal warfare came out of military necessity; defeating the South required imitating their tactics. Coupled with Grant’s focus on guerrillas, which Sherman soon came to share, these ideas were rooted in the belief that Southern forces brought war and vengeance upon themselves. This became a theme throughout Sherman’s writings, and it echoed a belief shared by much of the Union Army. He wrote:

21. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 140. In the early years of the Civil War, Union armies generally offered cash or receipts to civilians whose property was taken, provided they did not attack Union troops. Civilians who were guilty or suspected of attacking or hampering Union forces were subject to the destruction of their property without compensation.

22. Grant to Sherman, 4 April 1864, in O.R., Series One, 32(pt. 3): 246.

23. Grant to Sheridan, 26 August 1864, in Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan, General, United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Webster, 1888), 1: 486.

24. W. T. Sherman to James Guthrie, 14 August 1864, cited in Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*, 398. Braxton Bragg fought as a Confederate general at Shiloh; Don Carlos Buell was a Union commander in the same campaign.

I know that in the beginning, I, too, had the old West Point notion that pillage was a capital crime, and punished it by shooting. . . . This was a one sided game of war, and many of us . . . ceased to quarrel with our own men about such minor things, and went in to subdue the enemy, leaving minor deprivations to be charged up to the account of the rebels who had forced us into the war, and who deserved all they got and more.<sup>25</sup>

This idea that the Southern people deserved their fate was of crucial importance to Northern commanders, especially Sherman. The notion that there were no noncombatants in the South, that every man, woman, and child contributed to the prolonging of the war, made it easier to justify attacks on civilians. As he wrote: "we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and we must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as the organized armies."<sup>26</sup>

By the fall of 1864 Sherman also shared Grant's alarm at the destruction caused by rebel guerrillas, and was reluctant to show mercy towards a Southern population which displayed few signs of weakening. He wrote in his memoirs that garrisoning captured Southern cities was "crippling our armies in the field by detachments to guard and protect the interest of a hostile population."<sup>27</sup> Guerrilla warfare and the collective responsibility of the South were inextricably linked in the Northern rationale for total war.<sup>28</sup>

Sherman went even further, arguing that without popular support Southern armies would collapse not just from want of supplies, but from want of spirit. His marches became "campaigns of terror and destruction," aimed at defeating the South psychologically as well as militarily.<sup>29</sup> To avoid garrisoning the city of Atlanta, for example, Sherman ordered the entire civilian population evacuated and set fire to warehouses, railroads, factories, and foodstuffs. He later explained: "I knew that the people of the South would read in this measure two important conclusions: one, that we were in earnest; and the other, if they were sincere in their common and popular clamor to 'die in the last ditch,' that the opportunity would soon come."<sup>30</sup> This war against the hearts and minds of the

25. Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*, 442.

26. Sherman to Halleck, 24 December 1864, in William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 705.

27. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 584.

28. John W. Brinsfield, "The Military Ethics of General William T. Sherman," in *The Parameters of Military Ethics*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown, with an Introduction by Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., U.S. Army Ret. (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1989), 151-64.

29. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 149.

30. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 585.

Southern people had enormous importance for Sherman. In messages pleading with Grant for permission to march from Atlanta to the sea, he maintained that such a demonstration of Northern power constituted "statesmanship,"<sup>31</sup> because it would lead inexorably to the deterioration of Southern morale. Failing that, Sherman was eager to teach the people of the South a lesson in the horrors of war, believing that a harsh war would ensure a lasting peace. He wished to "make them so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it."<sup>32</sup>

Sherman never doubted his conviction that responsibility for the war, as well as the power to end it, lay solely with the South. "If they want peace," he stated, "they and their relatives must stop the war."<sup>33</sup> This belief carried with it the knowledge that his armies left desolation and despair in their wake, but always he returned to the notion of responsibility. In a letter to the citizens of Atlanta he declared: "Now that the war comes home to you, you feel very different. You deprecate its horrors, but did not feel them when you sent car-loads of soldiers and ammunition . . . to carry war into Kentucky and Tennessee."<sup>34</sup> By this juncture, Sherman had resigned himself to the necessities of total war. "You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will," he wrote in the same letter. "War is cruelty and you cannot refine it."<sup>35</sup>

Savannah fell in December of 1864, in time for Sherman to present the city to Lincoln as a Christmas present. On 1 February of the following year, he turned northward for an even more destructive assault on the Carolinas. Aware of his army's unique hatred for the state where secession began, Sherman dreaded unleashing his legions upon South Carolina. As he wrote: "the whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South Carolina. I almost tremble at her fate, but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her."<sup>36</sup> The march was as terrible as Sherman anticipated, climaxing with the infamous burning of Columbia only weeks before the end of the war. In his writings Sherman again noted the three tenets of his philosophy of total war. The first was military necessity, for he believed that destruction of civilian property and supplies shortened the war by depriving Southern armies of material support. Closely related was the notion of psychological warfare, depriving the Southern people of their spirit, and dousing their enthusiasm for war. Finally, there was the idea

31. Sherman to Grant, 6 November 1864, in O.R., Series One, 39(pt. 3): 660.

32. Sherman to Halleck, 17 September 1863, in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 365.

33. Sherman to Halleck, 4 September 1864, *ibid.*, 585.

34. *Ibid.*, 602.

35. Sherman to James M. Calhoun, E. E. Rawson, and S. C. Wells, 12 September 1864, in O.R., Series One, 39(pt. 2): 418.

36. Sherman to H. W. Halleck, 24 December 1864, in O.R., Series One, 44: 799.

of collective responsibility, the belief that whatever happened, the South deserved it. For Sherman, defeating the Confederate Army and its leaders was not enough; every person in the South was seen as part of the war effort, and only total war held the prospect of defeating them all.

Just as Sherman came to share Grant's concept of total war, so did Philip Sheridan. After the Civil War Sheridan would put these lessons to use in the Indian campaigns of 1868 to 1883, sealing the fate of America's native population on the frontier. Unlike Sherman and Grant, Sheridan never clearly spelled out the origins of his belief in total war. He did, however, serve with Grant from 1863 to 1865, first in Tennessee, and eventually as cavalry commander of the Army of the Potomac. It seems reasonable to conclude that Sheridan, much like Sherman, came to share Grant's conviction that breaking the Southern people required the abandonment of more established forms of warfare.<sup>37</sup> He eagerly embraced the new ideas: "I do not hold war to mean simply that lines of men shall engage each other in battle. This is but a duel, in which one combatant seeks the other's life; war means much more, and is far worse than this."<sup>38</sup> His experience convinced him that "reduction to poverty brings prayers for peace more surely and more quickly than does the destruction of human life."<sup>39</sup>

Such views were well suited to the kind of destructive warfare envisioned by Grant when he ordered Sheridan into the Shenandoah Valley in the fall of 1864. Charged with turning the Shenandoah into a "barren waste" to deny Confederate armies a major source of supplies, Sheridan destroyed everything of military value. On 7 October, he proudly informed Grant:

I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay, farming implements; over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep. . . . the Valley, from Winchester up to Staunton, ninety two miles, will have but little in it for man or beast.<sup>40</sup>

Confidently, Sheridan later notified Grant that "I will soon commence on Loudoun County, and let them know there is a God in Israel."<sup>41</sup> In this, his first independent Army command of the war, Sheridan showed

37. Grant certainly made clear his belief in resource destruction prior to sending Sheridan into the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. See note 22.

38. Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 88.

39. Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 1: 488.

40. Sheridan to Grant, 7 October 1864, in O.R., Series One, 43(pt. 1):30-31.

41. Sheridan to H. W. Halleck, 26 November 1864, in O.R., Series One, 43(pt. 2): 671-72.

a penchant for total war that would become his trademark during the Indian wars of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were far from alone in their enthusiasm for total war. In his own way even Chief of Staff Halleck approved, discarding the staunch disapproval of total war he learned from Mahan at West Point. In a book written before the Civil War, Halleck denounced the practice of living off the land, declaring: "The inevitable consequences of this system are universal pillage and a total relaxation of discipline . . . and the ordinary peaceful and non-combatant inhabitants are converted into bitter and implacable enemies."<sup>42</sup>

By 1864, however, Halleck had joined the righteous clamor for total war, especially for vengeance against the South. In a letter to Sherman, who was campaigning in Georgia, Halleck outlined his wrathful suggestions for Southern noncombatants.

Let the disloyal families of the country, thus stripped, go to their husbands, fathers, and natural protectors, in the rebel ranks; we have tried three years of conciliation and kindness without any reciprocation; on the contrary, those thus treated have acted as spies and guerrillas in our rear and within our lines. . . . I would destroy every mill and factory within reach which I did not want for my own use.<sup>43</sup>

When Sherman's forces reached the Carolinas, and appeared headed for the city of Charleston, Halleck was even more specific. "Should you capture Charleston, I hope that by some accident the place may be destroyed, and if a little salt should be sown upon its site it may prevent the growth of future crops of nullification and secession."<sup>44</sup>

Halleck's transformation to a hesitant Cato the Elder resonated with the depth of commitment found among the more ordinary members of Sherman's army. The enlisted men called Sherman "Uncle Billy," and they enthusiastically agreed with the necessity of a war against resources and civilians. Most noncombatants escaped with their lives, but with little else. And for many soldiers, the march through Georgia was a

42. H. Wager Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science* (New York: Appleton, 1846), 91. It is interesting that although the tactics of total war did deepen the bitterness felt by many Southerners towards the Union Army, they did not generally inspire most Confederates to fight on. This starkly contrasts with the heightened commitment to triumph inspired among many peoples by similar tactics during World War II: among Britons by the blitz; among the German people by Allied bombings; and generated among the people of the Ukraine by the German Army. This is not the place to account for this aspect of the Civil War, though one possible reason is that though Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan destroyed millions of dollars worth of material possessions, they generally avoided killing civilians. In World War II, the Allies and Germans did not.

43. Halleck to Sherman, 28 September 1864, in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 603.

44. Halleck to Sherman, 18 December 1864, in O.R., Series One, 44: 741.

gigantic pleasure excursion. As one Union soldier wrote: "we had a gay old campaign. . . . Destroyed all we could not eat, stole their niggers, burned their cotton and gins, spilled their sorghum, burned and twisted their R. Roads and raised Hell generally."<sup>45</sup>

But to say that many Union soldiers enjoyed their rampage is not to suggest the destruction lacked military value. Atrocities and outrages certainly occurred, but for Sherman and his men only a thin line separated these excesses from the destruction needed to bring an end to the war. Even an Alabama-born major attached to Sherman's staff came to believe the whirlwind of devastation was vital, even merciful, because it aimed at shortening the war. He wrote in his diary:

It is a terrible thing to consume and destroy the sustenance of thousands of people . . . while I deplore this necessity daily and cannot bear to see the soldiers swarm as they do through fields and yards . . . nothing can end this war but some demonstration of their helplessness. . . . This Union and its Government must be sustained, at any and every cost; to sustain it, we must war upon and destroy the organized rebel forces, must cut off their supplies, destroy their communications . . . produce among the people of Georgia a thorough conviction of the personal misery which attends war, and the utter helplessness and inability of their "rulers," State or Confederate, to protect them. . . . If that terror and grief and even want shall help to paralyze their husbands and fathers who are fighting us . . . it is mercy in the end.<sup>46</sup>

The crushing effect of this campaign on the morale of Southern soldiers was summed up eloquently, even sadly, in the almost illiterate prose of a Confederate private.

i hev conkluded that the dam fulishness uv tryin to lick shurmin Had better be stoped. we hav bin gettin nuthin but hell & lots uv it ever sinse we saw the dam yankys & I am tirde uv it. . . . Their thicker an lise on a hen and a dam site ornraier."<sup>47</sup>

45. Bruce Catton, *The Centennial History of the Civil War*, vol. 3, *Never Call Retreat* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1965), 415. Critics may claim that soldiers of all armies have historically sought to loot and plunder their enemies, that Sherman's beliefs were echoed by the rank and file only because it justified their preferred behavior. Yet the depth of bitterness and rage felt by many common soldiers seems to suggest that, in addition to motives of greed and avarice, they too believed the South deserved its fate.

46. Mark A. DeWolfe Howe, ed., *Marching with Sherman: Passages from the Letters and Campaign Diaries of Henry Hitchcock* (New Haven, 1927), 82, 125, 168, cited by James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 811.

47. Spencer Glasgow Welch, *A Confederate Surgeon's Letters to His Wife* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1911), 121.

Sherman's engine of destruction was having the desired effect on Southern spirits, though it created animosity and bitterness among the people of the South for generations. Yet Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan consistently argued that total war was necessary to bring about an early end to the war, and the tactics of terror were forced on the Union by the ferocity of Southern resistance. The destruction, they contended, seemed poetic justice for a people who brought war on themselves. This entry of total war into the mainstream of American military thought was evident in the *United States Service Magazine* in 1865.

It will be different when it is realized that to break up the rebel armies is not going to bring peace, that the people must be influenced. . . . They must feel the effects of war. . . . They must feel its inexorable necessities, before they can realize the pleasures and amenities of peace.<sup>48</sup>

By the time of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, an entire generation of Army officers had been exposed to the philosophy of total war. It was this generation that would battle Native Americans in the decades to come, and it is no accident that with Grant as their Commander in Chief, Sherman as General of the Army, and Sheridan in command of the frontier, they would use the same terrifying tactics to achieve the same devastating results.

### III

In the years following the Civil War, U. S. Grant became president, and Sherman rose to command the entire American army. Removed from the field by the demands of Washington, Sherman passed the torch to Sheridan, who from 1867 to 1883 took the lessons of total war and applied them to the frontier. The forces under his command fought over 619 engagements, completing the conquest of the American West from its native population.<sup>49</sup>

Sheridan's odyssey in the west, and his refinement of the tactics of total war to suit the frontier, began in 1867 when he assumed command of the Department of the Missouri. Composed of Missouri, Kansas, Indian Territory, and the territories of Colorado and New Mexico, Sheridan's new command was garrisoned by only 6,000 men.<sup>50</sup> This minuscule force reflected the astonishing reduction of the American army in the aftermath of the Civil War; from 1869 until the war with

48. Deb Keim, "Our Moral Weakness," *United States Service Magazine* 3 (1865): 372.

49. Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 345.

50. *Ibid.*, 1.

Spain in 1898, total strength averaged no more than 25,000.<sup>51</sup> Sheridan would later write that “no army in modern times has had such an amount of work put upon the same number of men.”<sup>52</sup>

The army was responsible for protecting freedmen and preserving law and order in the South, as well as garrisoning frontier forts, defending the railroads, and escorting settlers on their treks westward. The acute shortage of men helped shape Sheridan’s tactics during the Indian wars, for it was vital that campaigns end swiftly and decisively.<sup>53</sup> To achieve total victory in short periods of time Sheridan waged war on resources, by striking in winter when Indians were most vulnerable. He drew on Civil War experiences to justify his actions, as he explained in an 1873 letter to Sherman.

In taking the offensive, I have to select that season when I can catch the fiends; and, 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 any 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 into Vicksburg or Atlanta because women and children were there?<sup>54</sup>

Sheridan was hardly the first to launch winter attacks on the frontier. Christopher “Kit” Carson and Patrick Connor conducted similar campaigns against the Navajo and Shoshonis in 1863 and 1864, and General John Sullivan used assaults on resources as part of his Revolutionary War battles with the Iroquois.<sup>55</sup> But there is little evidence Sherman or Sheridan drew exclusively on those experiences after the Civil War. They relied primarily on their wartime experience to serve as a guide for future frontier wars, and no doubt agreed with Carson and Connor’s methods because they reinforced total war concepts conceived in the South. As Robert Utley wrote, “Sherman and Sheridan were of a single mind on strategy. Atlanta and the Shenandoah Valley furnished the

51. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 158–59. Much of that strength was spread along the Rio Grande and the Eastern seaboard. In contrast, Sheridan commanded more than 45,000 men in his Shenandoah Valley campaign; Sherman over 60,000 during his march through Georgia and the Carolinas.

52. Sheridan to Sherman, in U.S. War Department, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the Year 1878*, 2 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1878), 1:33.

53. Overextended almost beyond comprehension, the army was still required to concentrate to achieve victories. Yet this concentration unavoidably left other parts of the frontier in peril.

54. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 185, citing Sheridan to Sherman, 9 May 1873, Division of the Missouri, Letters Sent, RG 393, Records of the United States Army; Sheridan to Sherman, 18 March 1870, Box 91, Sheridan Papers.

55. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 345–46. Colonists used them in isolated instances even earlier in American history.



precedents.”<sup>56</sup> Sherman and Sheridan also expanded the aim of total war by fighting for strategic victory rather than simple tactical advantage. Their system of war aimed at subjugating entire races of people. Earlier generals often attacked resources inconsistently and only as a means of defeating Native Americans in the field and pushing them westward, not as a means of subjugation on the Civil War model.

Ironically, the Civil War was generally a poor model for fighting on the frontier. Ponderous supply lines and slow-moving columns were both vulnerable to attack and easy to avoid, but most officers were unwilling to challenge tactics that had been so successful against the South. They reflected the mind-set at West Point and among senior commanders, who were concerned with future wars against conventional foreign armies, not with counter-guerrilla warfare in the west.<sup>57</sup> And though there were exceptions like George Crook and Nelson Miles who threw away the book and fought Native Americans on their own terms, Army doctrine did not change.<sup>58</sup> Sherman and Sheridan remained unrepentant advocates of total war, which alone among Civil War lessons proved extraordinarily successful on the frontier.<sup>59</sup>

Just as in the South, responsibility was placed on the shoulders of noncombatants, who presumably deserved their fate for supporting enemies of the army. Sheridan's case was less than plausible in the Indian wars, where the army rather than the enemy was often the aggressor. The general realized this, writing to the War Department in 1878 that: “we took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this they made war. Could any one expect less?”<sup>60</sup>

Yet these inner notions did not deter Sheridan from waging relentless and aggressive campaigns against Native Americans. In the fall of 1868

56. Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 144. Utley argues that Sherman and Sheridan gave new significance to the importance of total war on the frontier.

57. Although fighting Native Americans was the primary mission of the Army for over a century, West Point never really dealt with frontier tactics in its curriculum. See Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 45.

58. *Ibid.*, 52-55.

59. It may be argued that total war methods might not have been necessary if the Army had developed a doctrine which focused on counter-guerrilla warfare, one that could have achieved success without the loss of life attendant with the destruction of foodstuffs and shelter.

60. Report of Lieutenant General Sheridan to General Sherman, 25 October 1878, in U.S. War Department, *Annual Report*, 1:36. Army policy had often been abandoned when fighting Native Americans, whose guerrilla tactics drove officers to discard the most tightly held notions of “civilized” warfare. There were racial dimensions to this kind of fighting as well; whites often rationalized brutal tactics because they considered Native Americans “savages.”

it was the Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanches who fell victim to winter attacks, in campaigns throughout northern Texas and the western portions of Indian Territory.<sup>61</sup>

In 1869 Sheridan was elevated to command of the Division of the Missouri, an enormous expanse of American territory stretching from Chicago to western Montana, and from Canada to the Texas border. Within the over one million square miles under his command lived most of the native population of North America: Sioux, Northern and Southern Cheyenne, Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahos, Utes, Apaches, and many others. No precise figures for their population can ever be known, though the estimate in 1882 was approximately 175,000.<sup>62</sup>

To these tribes Sheridan brought the same kind of ferocious attacks that had proven successful in earlier campaigns. Writing to Ranald S. Mackenzie prior to launching a campaign against the Kickapoo in 1873, Sheridan ordered: "I want you to be bold, enterprising, and at all times full of energy, when you begin, let it be a campaign of annihilation, obliteration, and complete destruction."<sup>63</sup> That these tactics were supported by his superiors, Grant and Sherman, was never in doubt. Responding to an increase in the number of attacks on emigrant wagon trains in 1868, Grant vowed to protect settlers, "even if the extermination of every Indian tribe was necessary to secure such a result."<sup>64</sup> And in response to the Fetterman massacre of 21 December 1866, in which eighty soldiers were killed by Sioux along the Bozeman Trail, Sherman proclaimed: "We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children."<sup>65</sup> Despite the ferocity of their language, it is unlikely that Grant, Sherman, or Sheridan ever intended extermination. Theirs was rhetoric meant for consumption by a public terrified by images of bloodthirsty attacks on settlers. But it is clear they were determined to act decisively, and Sheridan's assaults on Indian resources promised success.

The key to this success was the high vulnerability of Native-American families and their resources. To a much greater degree than the Confederate Army, Native-American raiding parties depended on tenuous

61. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 159.

62. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 117.

63. Robert Goldthwaite Carter, *On the Border with Mackenzie, or Winning West Texas from the Commanche* (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1961), 399-406, cited by Clarence D. Clendenen, *Blood on the Border: The United States Army and the Mexican Irregulars* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 66.

64. *New York Times*, 16 October 1868, 1.

65. Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 99, citing Sherman to U. S. Grant, 28 December 1866, in 39: 2 Senate Executive Documents, II (serial 1277), No. 16, 4.

sources of supplies. In warm months their superior mobility and knowledge of the terrain made them almost impervious to attack. But in winter their custom was to pitch camp and wait for spring, and Sheridan found these stationary camps to be easy targets. Winter attacks destroyed shelter and foodstuffs, forcing Native Americans to surrender or attempt escape through the snow, where most died of starvation and exposure. This was true of war ponies as well. Their destruction eliminated mobility for those warriors that survived until spring, and without mobility they were doomed.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the success of these tactics, other nations ignored the American example, believing it to be isolated and too rare for general instruction. Yet Sheridan was convinced. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 he accompanied the Prussian Army as an observer, and was amazed at the limited attacks made on civilians and resources. In a conversation with Bismarck while Paris lay under siege, Sheridan summed up his philosophy of war by declaring: "The proper strategy consists in the first place in inflicting as telling blows as possible upon the enemy's army, and then causing the inhabitants so much suffering that they must long for peace, and force their government to demand it. The people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war."<sup>67</sup>

Upon his return to America Sheridan had ample opportunity to put these ideas into practice, fighting a number of wars designed to keep the Indians on closely guarded reservations.<sup>68</sup> In the Red River War of 1874-75, he returned to winter attacks in ruthless campaigns against the Southern Cheyenne, who were further weakened by disintegration of the great southern buffalo herd. Indeed, elimination of the buffalo became economic warfare of the first order, and Sheridan actively encouraged their extermination. When the Texas state legislature was considering a bill to protect buffalo in 1875, he portrayed bison hunters as vital components of the war against Native Americans:

These men have done in the last two years, and will do more in the next years, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. . . . They are destroying the Indians' commissary; and it is a well known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; but for the

66. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 159.

67. Moritz Busch, *Bismarck: Some Secret Pages of His History*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1898), 1: 127-28.

68. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 160.

sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.<sup>69</sup>

As the last of the southern herd vanished, Sheridan turned to the great northern herd, writing to the Adjutant General in 1881:

If I could learn that every buffalo in the northern herd were killed I would be glad. . . . The destruction of this herd would do more to keep Indians quiet than anything else that could happen.<sup>70</sup>

Though a handful of buffalo were saved, Sheridan was proven correct. From his military perspective, buffalo were only an economic resource of the Plains Indians, one that played a role of critical importance in their way of life. In that sense, they were no different than railroads or foodstuffs in the Shenandoah in 1864; their elimination promised an end to the fighting. The slaughter of buffalo helped settle the “vexed Indian question,” and the “domination and thorough destruction of a flowered culture” was complete.<sup>71</sup>

The defeat of the northern Plains Indians in 1876–77, and the annihilation of the buffalo, ended serious resistance on the frontier. There were trials in 1877 with the Nez Perce and in the 1880s with the Apache, but the outcome of these duels remained a foregone conclusion.<sup>72</sup> Given superior resources, and ultimately superior tactics, the army was bound to prevail. That it succeeded with so small a force in so short a time was due to Sheridan’s relentless energy and commitment to total war. As Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk sadly wrote: “Wherever we went, the soldiers came to kill us, and it was all our own country.”<sup>73</sup>

#### IV

In hindsight the tactics of the Indian wars bear a remarkable similarity to methods employed during the Civil War. Given the continuity repre-

69. John R. Cook, *The Border and the Buffalo: An Untold Story of the Southwest Plains* (Topeka: Crane and Company, 1907; reprint ed., New York: Citadel Press, 1967), 163–64.

70. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 246, citing Sheridan to Adjutant General, 13 October 1881, Box 29, Sheridan Papers.

71. Paul L. Hedren, “The Great Sioux War: An Introduction,” in *The Great Sioux War 1876–77: The Best From Montana, The Magazine of Western History*, ed. Paul L. Hedren (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1991), 1. Hedren refers specifically to the destruction of the Sioux, but his comments seem appropriate for all the Indians of the Plains.

72. Weigley, *The American War of War*, 163.

73. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1932; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 138.

sented by Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan, this is no surprise, though it must be remembered that each struggled to find a doctrine that worked. Like other Union officers, they began the Civil War as prisoners of their education and previous experience. When the war ended, however, they were accustomed to a form of warfare uniquely suited to changing national policy towards Native Americans.<sup>74</sup> An old cliché holds that the Army always prepares to fight the last war; if so, Sheridan was fortunate that his “last war” accustomed him to a style of warfare also suited to the frontier.

In their desperate search for success during the early years of the Civil War, Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan abandoned the limited tactics of their training to seek victory with more methodical, destructive methods. They waged war on the physical and spiritual infrastructure of the Confederacy, matching the South’s frightening resolve with equally frightening tactics. The battlefields of the Civil War were classrooms in which American officers learned the tactics they would apply with devastating effect against Native Americans. Faced with an implacable foe on the frontier, the Army completed the evolution of a strategy born of necessity into the dominant doctrine of the era.

The generals who introduced the strategy of total war to American military thought were memories before their tactics earned a formal title. Though their writings make no mention of the phrase “total war,” they clearly understood the meaning of the idea, and its potential for subsequent generations of warriors. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were hardly the first to wage war on civilians or resources, and if history is any guide they will not be the last. They were, however, prophets of their era, just as Shakespeare’s Henry V was a prophet of his own.

. . . for, as I am a soldier . . . I will not leave the  
half-achieved Harfleur  
Till in her ashes she lies buried.  
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand shall range  
With conscience wide as hell . . .

74. In the antebellum period, the government was concerned primarily with forcing Native Americans further west. After the Civil War, white encroachment led the government to pursue a policy of subjugation, necessitating the strategy of total war.