THE MILITARY ETHICS OF GENERAL WILLIAM T. SHERMAN:

A REASSESSMENT

by

JOHN W. BRINSFIELD

The morality of General William Tecumseh Sherman's military campaigns—what he did and what he allowed his subordinate commanders and troops to do—has been extensively debated for more than a century. Sherman's critics charge that as a commander Sherman employed such terrorist tactics as licensing the random execution of noncombatants, destroying and pillaging private property, and even plotting Indian genocide. According to Sherman's detractors, his troops during both the Civil War and the Indian Wars, protected by the moral indifference of their commander, were guilty of murder, theft, arson, rape,[1] and the desecration of cemeteries and burial grounds.[2]

During the Atlanta campaign, for example, General W. P. Howard of the Georgia State Militia reported to Governor Joseph Brown that "the crowning act of their wickedness and villainy . . . was in removing the dead from vaults in the cemetery, robbing coffins of their silver name plates and tippings, and then depositing their own dead in the vaults."[3] Confederate General John B. Hood criticized Sherman's decision to evacuate the population of Atlanta in September 1864, writing to Sherman that his action "transcends, in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war."[4] General Richard Taylor, son of President Zachary Taylor, wrote in 1879 that "Sherman and Sheridan, spattered with Southern blood, were throwbacks to a barbarous age."[5] Jefferson Davis, whose *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* provoked a newspaper debate with Sherman, wrote of the March to the Sea: "The arson of the dwelling-houses of noncombatants and the robbery of their property, extending even to the trinkets worn by women, made the devastation as relentless as savage instincts could suggest."[6] Mrs. Davis evidently did not feel that her husband had put the matter strongly enough. She offered her own moral assessment of Sherman in the *Army-Navy Journal* of 10 May 1884: "He was an inhuman monster—what he did not use he destroyed."[7]

Sherman was not slow to defend himself and his army from these piecemeal attacks. Over the course of 20 years, from 1864 to 1884, Sherman wrote letters, testified in court, gave speeches, and published his memoirs in an effort to set the record straight. In a letter to Captain J. H. Lee in 1881, Sherman explained his motivation:

> We must speak and write else Europe will be left to infer that we conquered not by courage, skill, and patriotic devotion, but by brute force and cruelty. The reverse was the fact, the Rebels were notoriously more cruel than our men. We never could work up our men to the terrible earnestness of the Southern forces. Their murdering of Union fugitives, burning of Lawrence, Chambersburg, Paducah and etc. were all right in

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their eyes, and if we burned an old cotton gin or shed it was barbarism. I am tired of such perversion, and will resent it always.[8]

Sherman denied that he had ever favored wanton destruction of human life in any instance; rather, he had acted throughout his military career to punish those who did not obey the law.[9] In the course of most of his major campaigns, Sherman said he preferred to conserve life and generally offered the enemy the opportunity to surrender before he set about his tasks of destruction.[10]

Sherman's problem throughout the Civil War was how to reconcile the brutal nature of modern war with the ethical values he had learned as a West Point cadet, as an Army officer, in his intermittent study of law from 1839 to 1859, and as a practicing attorney. While his primary interest as a general was undeniably directed toward strategy and tactics, there was still part of his intellectual heritage from five generations of Sherman judges that demanded a correlation between the conduct of war on one hand and the laws of warfare on the other.

In the 19th century there were many schools of classical ethics. Francis Lieber, in his 1838 edition of *A Manual of Political Ethics*, pointed out that essentially all of the schools dealt with two concepts: morals and ethics. Moral philosophy answered the question *What must I do*? Ethics answered the question *Why must I do it*?

The ethical school that most attracted Sherman was not the metaphysical or theological but the pragmatic and utilitarian, as befitted the profession of a soldier and the avocation of a lawyer. Law was a perfect sanction for Sherman's utilitarian military ethic because the law books recognized that every punishment should be proportionate to the crime. If rebellion was the highest crime against an organized society, both utilitarian ethics and the law of nations sanctioned extreme measures—such as devastation by fire and sword—as permissible expedients.

To truly understand the ethics—the rationale—for Sherman's punitive expeditions in the Civil War and after, one must approach his ideas from the standpoint of their chronological development. Sherman himself noted that his military ethics before 1862 were different than they were after that year. The detailed development of Sherman's thought from his first course in moral philosophy at West Point through the end of his military career would be a lengthy task. Nevertheless, a few comments may shed some new light on his concept of the ethics of war and support the thesis that Sherman's philosophy of war was not totally devoid of ethical and legal principle.

ETHICAL EDUCATION AT WEST POINT: 1839-40

The two courses that seem to have contributed most to Sherman's early ethical thought were both taught in his senior, or "first-class," year at West Point. After his summer encampment preceding that year, Sherman wrote to his brother John in August 1839:

> The encampment is now over and we are once more in Barracks and tomorrow will commence our studies . . . . This year's course of study is by far the most important of the four as well as the most interesting embracing as it does—Engineering—both Civil and Military—the construction of fortifications as well as the manner of attacking and defending them, Mineralology, and Geology, Rhetoric, Moral Philosophy, International and Common Law, Artillery and Infantry tactics.[11]

Sherman enjoyed his course in fortifications from Professor D. H. Mahan, who was probably his favorite instructor.[12] Mahan not only taught Sherman the value of the spade but also offered his opinion that the way to defeat the Indians in Florida was to destroy their food supplies.[13]

One book that Professor Mahan frequently referenced in his course was Baron Simon Francois Gay de Vernon's *Treatise on the Science of War and Fortification*, which had an appendix by Lieutenant J. M. O'Connor summarizing the thought of Jomini and Henry Lloyd on grand strategy.

De Vernon's *Science of War* had been replaced as a textbook at West Point in 1836, but Sherman checked it out of the library in 1840 anyway.[14] It is interesting that the first chapter of O'Connor's translation of the *Science of War* offers a kind of Hobbesian analysis of society. "In the original state," the text reads, "mankind possessed mere animal sensibility, which results when a state of war between nations occurs and treaties and conventions are broken." In the condition of bestiality to which men revert in war, all civilization breaks down and even "churches may be used as redoubts."[15]

Sherman was not impressed with Jomini, whose work he said was "too dull, prosaic and didactic," but he was drawn to Mahan and to the general notion that obedience to law was the prerequisite for avoiding the chaos of war.[16] By the end of 1864, Professor Mahan stated this view even more directly by noting that "there are times in a nation's existence when the safety of the State is the highest law."[17]

The second course, which probably contributed even more to the development of Sherman's ethical thought, was a course in moral philosophy taught by Chaplain Jasper Adams. Chaplain Adams was an Episcopal clergyman who had been successively a professor of mathematics at Brown University, president of Charleston College in South Carolina, and president of Geneva College in New York before coming to West Point. He was not one of Sherman's favorites on the faculty; indeed, Sherman remarked that during his four years at West Point he was not "a Sunday School cadet."[18] But the subject matter covered in "the Chaplain's Course," as it was titled in the USMA Regulations of 1839, did capture Sherman's imagination: Adams taught moral philosophy, the law of nations, and constitutional law in the course the cadets called simply "ethics."[19]

Sherman was not the first cadet to be captivated by the readings in the Chaplain's Course. From 1816 when the regulations of the Military Academy specified that "a course of ethics shall include natural and political law," to 1874 when the Law Department was formed at West Point, nine different chaplains taught law to the cadets using a series of textbooks ranging from Vattel's *Law of Nations* (published in 1758) to Woolsey's *Introduction to the Study of International Law* (published in 1860). Robert E. Lee told Bishop Joseph Wilmer of Albemarle County, Virginia, that had he not read Rawle's *A View of the Constitution* in Chaplain Warner's course, he would never have left the Union.[20] General Erasmus D. Keyes said he "learned more from Professor Warner in the section room than from any other teacher," and Stonewall Jackson, as a cadet in 1845, wrote to his sister Laura that his class in ethics was "preferable to any other in the course."[21] Walter L. Fleming, a professor of history at Louisiana State University at the turn of the century and an expert on early education at West Point, went so far as to state that the Chaplain's Course was one of the most important at the Academy in light of the history of the Civil War.[22] In fact, one could make a pretty good case for the thesis that the textbooks in the Chaplain's Course contained many of the operative strategic and ethical concepts of the Civil War and that these concepts, including retaliation, blockade, emancipation, and unconditional surrender, were discussed at West Point more than 20 years before the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter.

The reason so many cadets were interested in the Chaplain's Course was that it combined the study of humanities and law,

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which were offered nowhere else in the curriculum. In Adams' course cadets recited for two hours a day from William Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy* and from James Kent's *Commentaries on American Law*. As Adams informed Superintendent Richard Delafield in February 1840:

> An exact knowledge of these textbooks is held to be of the greatest importance, long and patient examinations are held upon them, and the relative standing of the Cadets in the Academy is made to depend on their acquaintance with them. Not only so, but their future rank in the army, and consequently their prospects in life, are made to depend on the degree of their acquaintance with them.[23]

Adams did not approve of Paley's book because it taught "the young men that they have no conscience, diminishes their respect for truth, and perplexes, if it does not confound the distinction between right and wrong."[24] A petition by Adams to replace Paley's text was denied by the academic board, however, in part because he had already changed textbooks three times in two years and had been warned by Joel R. Poinsett, President Van Buren's Secretary of War, "to be more careful."[25]

The content of Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy* is fascinating and worth a dissertation in itself because the textbook was studied by Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, A. S. Johnston, J. E. Johnston, P. G. T. Beauregard, Ulysses Grant, and Sherman. Paley's work presents advice for daily living coupled with some reflections on the origin of government, on crime and punishment, on duty, and on the justice of warfare.

In essence Paley took a utilitarian approach to life, for "the obligation of every law depends upon its ultimate utility."[26] Rules "derive their force not from their internal reasonableness or justice but from their establishment."[27] God is the ultimate lawmaker,

> a Being whose knowledge penetrates every concealment, from the operation of whose will not art or flight can escape, and in whose hands punishment is sure; such a Being may conduct the moral government of his creation in the best and wisest manner by pronouncing a law that every crime shall finally receive a punishment proportioned to the guilt which it contains, abstracted from any foreign consideration whatever [and] by carrying this law into strict execution.[28]

It is God's will that all men should be happy, and happiness is generally the greatest good for the greatest number.[29] Therefore, one asks about any moral question, "Does it promote or diminish the general happiness?" If an action promotes happiness, it is the will of God.[30]

In spite of the utilitarian nature of Paley's work, James Kent's *Commentaries on American Law* was Sherman's favorite textbook in the Chaplain's Course. In 1829 James Kent was a professor of law at Columbia, president of the New York Historical Society, and Colonel Sylvanus Thayer's personal friend. Because Kent's book covered both the law of nations and constitutional law in one summary volume, and was thus more easily taught, it replaced the works by Vattel and Rawle that had been used intermittently from 1820 to 1832.

Kent's views of human nature and the practice of warfare were rooted in a pessimistic realism. For example, Kent begins his "Third Lecture," titled "Of the Declaration and other early measures of a state of war," by contrasting Bacon's statement that "war is one of the highest trials of right . . . put upon the justice of God by an appeal to arms," with Hobbes' view that "continual war is a natural instinct of man in a savage state."[31] Kent believed that man, without the social compact, reverted to a primitive level. War was "a dissolution of all moralities" and was fought between "all the individuals of the one, and all the individuals of which the other nation is composed."[32] Retaliation was allowed in such a total war to restrain the enemy from further excess.[33]

One of the best protective measures against such chaos was a strong central

government. Kent observed that "the history of the federal government of Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and Holland afford melancholy examples of destructive civil war springing from the disobedience of the separate members."[34] Therefore, Kent believed, "Disobedience to the laws of the union must either be submitted to by the government to its own disgrace or those laws must be enforced by arms."[35]

Coupled with Kent's "total war" theory and his unionist sentiments was his strong aversion to slavery. Kent's solution to the slavery problem was not Christian persuasion, as Paley had suggested, but violent, though legal, confrontation. Kent noted bluntly, "Pirates can be exterminated without declaration of war and the African slave trade is declared to be piracy by the statute laws of England and the United States."[36]

Sherman's class was examined in moral philosophy as well as other subjects in January 1840. Typically, examination periods lasted for 17 days, from eight o'clock in the morning to dusk; each cadet was examined orally by the entire faculty and sometimes by members of the Board of Visitors.[37] Cadet Sherman wrote, "The results were favorable toward me as usual."[38] He placed sixth in his class in moral philosophy, better than cadets Grant, Stuart, and Davis but not as well as Lee or Jackson placed in their classes.[39] Had it not been for Sherman's average of 150 demerits a year for problems in conduct, he would have graduated fourth rather than sixth in his class.

The academic curriculum was not the only place that military ethics and discipline were emphasized, of course. The code of honor, compulsory attendance at chapel, and the USMA Regulations of 1839 all contributed to an ethical awareness. Article I, paragraph 52, of the Articles of War, which were appended to the USMA Regulations, caught Sherman's eye. That paragraph made it a capital offense for a soldier to quit his post in order to plunder or pillage. After 1862 Sherman said he ignored this "old" idea.[40]

FROM FLORIDA TO TENNESSEE: THE TRANSFORMATION

From the time that Lieutenant Sherman joined the 3d Artillery Regiment in September 1840 until the Civil War began, he never really saw a battlefield. He was one of the few major commanders in the Civil War who had no combat experience in the Mexican War. His letters to his brothers and sisters from Fort Pierce, Florida, in 1841 show a relatively conservative view of military ethics. He discussed the treaties broken by the Indians and the suffering of their women and children, which was borne "with fortitude."[41] In his single engagement against the Seminoles, Sherman rode alone into an Indian village after instructing his troops to "revenge" him if he were killed. He talked the Indians out of their weapons and marched them back to Fort Pierce.[42] It was a bloodless victory that Sherman would try to repeat at Atlanta in 1864 and at Fort Laramie in 1867, but with less success.

Sherman did study law during his Army assignments in Florida and South Carolina. It was perhaps natural that he considered law as a possible second profession, as did Stonewall Jackson and J. E. B. Stuart. Yet he practiced law for only one year at Leavenworth, Kansas, before the Civil War began. Years earlier, Sherman had written to his brother John that although "everybody" in his class studied law at West Point, he did not believe he was enough of an orator to make it his profession.[43] He preferred the thought of retiring to a good farm in Iowa.

Sherman's career from his Army resignation in 1853 to the beginning of the Civil War appears to have had a marked effect on his outlook on life, but an analysis of his psychological development in the face of personal banking and business failures exceeds the scope of this discussion. Certainly his decision to abandon his post as superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary and Military Academy in order to stay in the Union "as long as a fragment" of the "Old Constitution" survived was a monumental decision for him.[44] The turning

point in Sherman's concept of military ethics, however, came between his service in Virginia in 1861 and his service in Tennessee in 1862.

Sherman's attitude in 1861 toward pillage and destruction can be seen in a letter to his wife, Ellen, after the first Battle of Bull Run:

> Then for the first time I saw the carnage of battle, men lying in every conceivable shape and mangled in a horrid way . . . . No curse could be greater than invasion by a voluntary army. No Goths or Vandals ever had less respect for the lives and property of friend and foes . . . .[45]

These comments were not directed at just any volunteer army but at his own in particular. Sherman wrote to his wife in August 1861:

> Our soldiers are the most destructive men that I have ever known. It may be that other volunteers are just as bad, indeed the complaint is universal, and I see no alternative but to let it take its course . . . . My only hope now is that a common sense of decency may be inspired into the minds of this soldiery to respect life and property.[46]

Even though Sherman had given up making "any friends in Virginia," he did try to maintain some discipline among his troops, who were "straggling for water, blackberries, or any thing on the way they fancied."[47]

Sherman's determination to keep his troops in line was further manifested during his service in Kentucky in the winter of 1861-62. He issued strict orders preventing his soldiers from taking any fresh food on the march, from sleeping in any vacant houses, and even from using Kentucky fence rails for firewood.[48] As a result, one regiment under his command, the Thirty-third Indiana, had more than half of its men in the hospital and suffered 62 deaths in a single month from exposure and from insufficient rations. When two citizens of Lexington, Kentucky, asked Sherman in October 1861 if he would arrest Southern sympathizers as a "retaliatory" measure, Sherman replied that he would arrest no one merely for holding an opinion as long as that person committed no overt criminal act.[49]

In carrying out these policies Sherman was obeying the orders of the War Department for operations in the border states. In spite of the fact that Jefferson Davis had written a personal letter to Abraham Lincoln on 6 July 1861 threatening random retaliatory executions of Union prisoners in Richmond if Confederate sailors captured by the Federal Navy were hanged as pirates, the War Department, through General Henry Halleck, had been holding to a very strict policy respecting the sanctity of private property and individual constitutional rights, and it continued to do so until mid-1862.[50] Sherman soon discovered, however, that the enemy did not operate under such constraints:

> 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 a 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.[51]

The genesis of Sherman's conversion from a proponent of warfare by the rules of courtesy to warfare by the rules of survival, therefore, was not the result of a deliberate policy rooted in intellectual theory. It was a reaction to the conditions he encountered in the field. Twenty years after the Civil War, Sherman reflected on his shift in thinking:

> 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 depredations 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.[52]

From his observations in 1862 in Kentucky and Tennessee, it was a short step for Sherman to begin to rationalize his changing views of warfare in terms of the darker side of the West Point curriculum of his cadet years and to see the conduct of war as involving, to a large measure, retaliation, punishment, revenge, and devastation.

Sherman was not alone in these observations, of course. Independently of Sherman, Colonel Ulysses S. Grant wrote in 1861 of his men of the Twenty-first Illinois on a march from Camp Yates to Missouri: "The same number of men never marched through a thickly settled country like this committing fewer depredations."[53] Yet Grant told his wife, Julia, "The people are inclined to carry on a guerrilla warfare that must eventuate in retaliation, and when it does commence it will be hard to control."[54]

By the summer of 1862 both the US Congress and the Lincoln Administration had become convinced that more stringent measures were necessary to subdue the rebels, who had fought so fiercely in the Peninsula Campaign and at Shiloh. On 13 July Brigadier General Steinwehr ordered Major William Steadman to arrest five citizens of Page County, Virginia, to be held as hostages and to suffer death in the event that any of Steinwehr's troops were killed by "bushwackers."[55] On 17 July Congress passed the famous Seizure Act, which provided for the confiscation or condemnation of all personal property belonging to persons engaged in rebellion.[56]

The Confederate government responded in kind by issuing General Order Number 54 on 1 August 1862, declaring the adoption of "just measures of retribution and retaliation as shall seem adequate to repress and punish these barbarities." Among other measures ordered by General Samuel Cooper, the Confederate States Inspector General, was the warning that the Confederate government would hang Union officers then held as prisoners of war in "a number equal to the number of our own citizens thus murdered by the enemy."[57]

In retaliation for increasing guerrilla activities in Mississippi and the number of "murders" committed by Southern "irregulars," Union General Henry Halleck, on 2 August 1862, ordered General Grant at Corinth, Mississippi, to

> clean out West Tennessee and North Mississippi of all organized enemies. If necessary, take up all active sympathizers, and either hold them as prisoners or put them beyond our lines. Handle that class without gloves, and take their property for public use. As soon as the corn gets fit for forage get all the supplies you can from the rebels in Mississippi. It is time that they should begin to feel the presence of war on our side.[58]

Within four days of the receipt of this order, General W. L. Elliott, Rosecrans' chief of staff at Corinth, ordered General James D. Morgan at Tuscumbia to move rebel women and children beyond his lines, seize their property, and burn their homes.[59]

At Memphis, Sherman reflected on this development in a letter to Secretary Chase, dated 11 August 1862, in words reminiscent of Kent's "total war" theory:

> The Government of the United States may now safely proceed on the proper rule that all in the South are enemies of all in the North; and not only are they unfriendly, but all who can procure arms now bear them as organized regiments or as guerillas. There is not a garrison in Tennessee where a man can go beyond the sight of the flagstaff without being shot or captured.[60]

Grant, in turn, reflected later that the "Constitution was therefore in abeyance for the time being, so far as it in any way affected the progress and termination of the war."[61]

With constitutional interpretation replaced by congressional law and the principle of military necessity, Sherman was free to suppress rebellion with almost any amount of

force necessary. On 1 October 1862 he wrote to his brother John:

> Even on the Mississippi the boats are fired on daily. I have been compelled to burn down one town and resort to retaliation. For after eighteen months of war the enemy is actually united, armed, and determined . . . . [The] northern people have to unlearn all their experience of the past thirty years and be born again before they will see the truth.[62]

The truth, for Sherman, was that by arming all of its citizens, the South, not the North, had plunged the nation into total war. If the Union was to survive, the people of the North would have to adjust themselves to fight on the terms that the South, Sherman charged, had dictated.

On 4 October 1862, Sherman underscored this belief in a letter to Major General Grant at Jackson, Tennessee. Sherman told Grant,

> Guerrillas have twice attacked boats near Randolph—the forest Queen and J. J. Roe—on both of which were many lady and children passengers. The attacks were wanton and cruel. I caused Randolph to be destroyed, and have given public notice that a repetition will justify any measures of retaliation such as loading the boats with their captive guerrillas as targets (I always have a lot on hand), and expelling families from the comforts of Memphis, whose husbands and brothers go to make up those guerrillas.[63]

Evidently this "new" turn of events in Memphis—and in his own command, for that matter—took Grant by surprise. On 18 October, when Sherman proposed to "expell ten secession families for every boat fired on," thereby visiting "on the neighborhood summary punishment," Grant sent a one-sentence endorsement to General Halleck:

> Respectfully forwarded to Headquarters of the Army for information of the General-in-Chief, embodying as it does a policy, which I approve but have given no order for, in regard to treatment of rebel families as punishment to prevent firing in to boats.[64]

Five days later, Colonel William S. Hillyer, Grant's aide-de-camp, wrote Sherman: "The general heartily approves your course in expelling secession families as a punishment and preventive example for guerrillas firing into boats."[65] For the first time in the Civil War, Sherman had a commander who understood the concept of retaliation to restrain the enemy, who had witnessed the effects of total war in Texas, and who, for that matter, was also once a student of the same West Point curriculum.

FROM ATLANTA TO THE SEA: THE APPLICATION

That Sherman, Grant, and Sheridan translated the will of Congress and the ideas of President Lincoln into a war of devastation aimed at total victory is not a fact requiring detailed proof. Sherman himself estimated that his March to the Sea cost the State of Georgia 15,000 first-rate mules, 5000 head of cattle, and 2000 horses, in addition to 34,979 Confederate casualties.[66] The question is not, however, what homes, towns, railroads, colleges, churches, or government buildings were destroyed. After all, Grant had instructed Sherman to "get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources."[67] The question is, to what extent did Sherman leave the West Point ideas behind in his quest for victory?

Sherman maintained in 1864 that he tried on many occasions to persuade his enemies to surrender and thereby to end the destruction his army was causing in the South:

> I contended at first, when we took Vicksburg, by all the rules of civilized warfare, they should have surrendered, and allowed us to restore Federal power in the land. But they did not. I claim also when we took Atlanta, that they were bound by every rule of civilized warfare to surrender their cause . . . .[68]

During the Georgia and Carolina campaigns, Sherman certainly used his authority under the law of nations, congressional law, Army regulations, and the directives of Lincoln and Grant to offer generous terms of surrender that were not only in accord with the precepts of Vattel but also in the finest Napoleonic tradition.[69] Yet, when he submitted to Governor Brown of Georgia an offer to "spare the State, and in our passage across it confine the troops to the main roads and . . . moreover, pay for all the corn and food we needed," the Georgia Legislature rejected Sherman's proposal, called for a levy en masse of all white males aged 16 to 45, released the prisoners from the state penitentiary, and even pressed all ministers not actively serving a church or synagogue into the Confederate forces.[70] In light of this response, Sherman told Colonel Joshua Hill, one of the emissaries to Governor Brown, "There is nothing left for me to do but to proceed."[71]

Of the conduct of his troops during the March to the Sea, Sherman wrote in 1875:

> No doubt many acts of pillage, robbery, and violence were committed by these parties of foragers, usually called 'bummers'; for I have since heard of jewelry taken from women, and the plunder of articles that never reached the commissary; but these acts were exceptional and incidental. I never heard of any cases of murder or rape; and no army could have carried along sufficient forage for a march of three hundred miles; so that foraging in some shape was necessary.[72]

When Sherman arrived in Savannah he placed the city, including its schools and churches, under his protection with the warning "If any person shall abuse these privileges by communicating with the enemy, or doing any act of hostility to the Government of the United States, he or she will be punished with the utmost rigor of the law."[73] Sherman claimed that the disposal of property in and around Savannah was in accord with the "laws of nations and the practice of civilized governments."[74]

Sherman's campaign in the Carolinas was marked with charges of pillage and arson, just as had been the case in Georgia. The ethical maxim he had recommended to his commanders on the March to the Sea was the principle of retaliation by degree and that principle was to be pursued, in effect, throughout his military career:

> In districts and neighborhoods where the army is unmolested, no destruction of (private) property should be permitted; but should guerrillas or bush wackers molest our march, or should the inhabitants burn bridges, obstruct roads, or otherwise manifest local hostility, then army commanders should order and enforce a devastation more or less relentless, according to the measure of such hostility.[75]

Sherman kept the responsibility for damages squarely on the shoulders of the Southern leadership. If they cooperated with him, he could be generous; if they opposed him, he was unrelenting in punishment.

Sherman's conduct in allegedly burning Columbia out of sheer malice and revenge for South Carolina's part in starting the Civil War seemed to his generation to mark the apex of his cruelty. Yet Sherman told the veterans of the Army of the Potomac in 1881, "I saw with my own eyes cotton bales which had been set on fire by the Confederate cavalry. Without Logan's troops not a house would have escaped."[76] If there were a few troops who got out of hand it was because, Sherman claimed, they found whiskey in the town the Confederates had made a liquor depot. Furthermore, the fire spread because "God Almighty started the wind that carried it."[77] "If I had made up my mind to burn Columbia, I would have burnt it with no more feeling than I would a common prairie dog village," Sherman testified, "but I did not do it."[78]

Sherman noted in 1881 that after 329 pages of testimony in 23 legal cases brought against him, an international commission of judges disallowed the claim that "Columbia was wantonly fired by General Sherman."[79] What he did at Columbia, as reflected partly

in his pocket diary, was to deliberately destroy only the public buildings. Then he left behind 500 beef cattle and 100 muskets for the citizens "to arm a guard to maintain order after we should leave the neighborhood."[80] Sherman consistently maintained, "Personally, I had not malice or desire to destroy that city or its inhabitants."[81]

The proof of such personal intent to avoid wanton injury in the Carolinas is in Sherman's continuing offer of peaceful terms to his enemies. In public and largely for propaganda purposes, Sherman would threaten to turn his army loose; in his words, the soldiers were "burning to avenge the national wrong which they attach to large cities which have been so prominent in dragging our country into civil war."[82] Thus he emphasized on one occasion that he would make North Carolina "howl"; but he also told his cavalry commander, General Kilpatrick, to deal "as moderately and fairly by North Carolinians as possible, and fan the flame of discord already subsisting between them and their proud cousins of South Carolina."[83] Finally, to General Joseph E. Johnston, Sherman wrote on 14 April 1865:

> I am fully empowered to arrange with you any terms for the suspension of further hostilities between the armies commanded by you and those commanded by myself . . . . General Stoneman is under my command, and my order will suspend any devastation or destruction contemplated by him. I will add that I really desire to save the people of North Carolina the damage they would sustain by the march of this army through the central or western parts of the State.[84]

Sherman's comment to Johnston is not at variance with his famous letter of 12 September 1864 to Atlanta Mayor James M. Calhoun, in which Sherman promised, "When peace does come, you may call on me for any thing. Then will I share with you the last cracker, and watch with you to shield your homes and families against danger from every quarter."[85]

AN INTEGRATED THEORY

With the surrender of Johnston's Army in North Carolina under terms other than those generously proposed, General Sherman's combat experience came to an end.[86] He had evolved an ethical theory of warfare, however, that would influence the conduct of the Indian Wars in the West for the next 20 years.

Sherman believed that society without law was chaotic. In 1860 he wrote, perhaps reflecting some of the old West Point ideas he had studied two decades before:

> The law is or should be our king; 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. For years this tendency to anarchy had gone on till now every state and country and town . . . makes and enforces the local prejudices as the law of the land. This is the real trouble, it is not slavery, it is the democratic spirit which substitutes mere opinions for law.[87]

The South violated the law first, Sherman believed. Southerners willingly participated in the 1860 election, but "because that election did not result as they wanted, they refused to abide by the result and appealed to war."[88] That decision, according to Sherman, was folly, madness, treason, and "a crime against civilization."[89] It left the South free to treat with foreign powers against the interests of the United States as a whole.

Sherman came to believe that the civil war the South was waging was a rebellion; therefore, under Vattel's old definition, the unjust and lawless rebels were subject to severe punishment.[90] Further, Sherman's theory of punishment leaned heavily on the ideas of collective responsibility and retaliation to prevent further cruelty by the enemy.[91] He instructed General Edward R. S. Canby, for example, to hold Southern civilians accountable for guerrilla outrages, "for if they fire on boats with women and children in [them], we can fire and burn

houses with women and children."[92] This was possible, of course, because warfare was waged between "all the individuals" on one side and "all the individuals" on the other. Eventually the enemy would tire and peace would return.

Sherman realized that war was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. "The legitimate object of war is a more perfect peace" under the authority of a lawful, democratic government.[93] Toward that end Sherman believed that warfare must be waged on a psychological as well as a military level. Thus many of Sherman's public statements during the Georgia campaign were designed to make the enemy "fear and dread us" and may have accounted for the fact that Sherman's armies suffered fewer campaign casualties in 1864 than his Confederate opponents.[94] General Grant, as a matter of fact, characterized Sherman's occupation of Atlanta as a "political campaign."[95]

On another level, however, Sherman saw war in somewhat metaphysical terms. He told the graduating class at West Point in 1876 that "wars are only the means to an end—not necessarily inhuman, barbarous, abhorred by God." Indeed, he suggested that "war is of divine origin," like lightning which strikes the just and the unjust alike. "We were born in war, baptized in war, and we have had wars of aggression and defence," Sherman told the cadets, but there is still "a Divinity that shapes our ends."[96]

How could war be of divine origin? Sherman wrote to Major Henry Turner two years after his West Point address:

> I believe God governs this world, with all its life, animal, vegetable and human, by invariable laws, resulting in the greatest good, though sometimes working seeming hardships. The idea of a vocation from God seems to me irreligious and I would look for the inspiration of a vocation in the opposite quarter (the Devil). When anybody assumes 'vocation' their reason and all sense ceases and man becomes simply a blind animal. My idea of God is that he has given man reason, and he has no right to disregard it.[97]

Presumably the abandonment of reason brought on war, which was its own punishment in Sherman's view. Since punishment for the crime of unrestrained passion is part of the invariable law of God, war is punishment of divine origin which affects both the guilty and the innocent. The best one could do in such circumstances was to end the war as quickly and as justly as possible.

Sherman, in his Civil War years, did not abandon his attachment to the law or to some of the ethical concepts he may have learned at West Point. Rather, he placed the laws of warfare on a continuum of expediency. The important thing was not the means but the end, and to this point Sherman was clearly a utilitarian thinker. What the South learned to fear was not Sherman's aggression nor his lack of mercy. It was his revenge.

Yet Sherman's job was not to philosophize, but to destroy the roots of serious rebellion, Southern and Indian, and he spent his entire military career to that end. His doctrines of collective responsibility and retaliation were rationalizations for ending a destructive war. They should be fully understandable rationalizations to those who are heirs not only of Atlanta and Columbia, but also of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.

In the last analysis, Sherman may have contributed something relatively important in the field of military ethics. Foreseeing the death and destruction that war would bring, he wept on hearing of the secession of South Carolina in 1860.[98] Nineteen years later, he would tell a Michigan audience: "It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell."[99] Yet even in hell Sherman tried to show that when circumstances allowed, there should be a regard if not for chivalry at least for the laws of nations. He was not the author of either the theory or the ethics of total war, but, in his generation, he may have been the leading intellectual apologist for both. To that extent he was not a total warrior completely devoid of principle.

NOTES

1. John B. Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 137-38, 200.
2. Cited in Elizabeth H. McCallie, *The Atlanta Campaign* (Atlanta: The Atlanta Historical Society, 1939), p. 26.
3. Ibid.
4. John B. Hood, *Advance and Retreat* (New Orleans: G. T. Beauregard, 1880), p. 230.
5. Cited in Thomas C. Leonard, *Above the Battle* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 13.
6. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881), II, 570.
7. "J. Davis' Opinion," *Army-Navy Journal*, 10 May 1884.
8. W. T. Sherman to Captain J. H. Lee of Spottswood, N.J., 14 June 1881, in The Papers of William T. Sherman, Letterbook 95, USMA Archives Microfilm Collection. (Hereinafter cited as Sherman Papers.)
9. Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1956), pp. 69-70; and Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), p. 597.
10. Athearn, pp. 69-70; and Lewis, p. 598.
11. W. T. Sherman to John Sherman, 31 August 1839, Sherman Papers.
12. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1957), II, 396.
13. George P. Winton, Jr., "Ante-Bellum Military Instruction of West Point Officers and Its Influence upon Confederate Military Organization and Operations," (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of South Carolina, 1972), p. 46.
14. USMA Library, "Entry of Books Issued to Cadets on Saturday Afternoons 1840-1843," in the USMA Archives, shows that Cadet Sherman checked out the *Science of War*, two volumes with plates, on 2 March 1840.
15. John Michael O'Connor, trans., *Vernon's Science of War and Fortification* (New York: J. Seymour, 1817), I, 10, 362.
16. William C. Brown, "General Sherman and the Infantry and Cavalry School," *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association*, 16 (July 1905), 124.
17. D. H. Mahan to the Hon. Gouverneur Kemble, 26 September 1864, in Edward Holden's *Library Manual*, II, 59, USMA Archives.
18. Lewis, p. 56.
19. USMA Academic Board Minutes, 5 November 1838, USMA Archives.
20. Cited in Wilbur Thomas, *General George H. Thomas* (New York: Exposition Press, 1964), p. 63. See also Douglas S. Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1934), I, 78-79.
21. E. D. Keyes, *Fifty Years Observation of Men and Events* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1884), p. 77; and Thomas Jackson Arnold, *Early Life and Letters of Stonewall Jackson* (Richmond, Va.: Dietz Press, 1957), p. 73.
22. Walter L. Fleming, "Jefferson Davis at West Point," *Metropolitan Magazine*, 1908, p. 282.
23. Jasper Adams to Major R. Delafield, 3 February 1840, in the Jasper Adams Papers, USMA Archives, Drawer F.
24. Ibid.
25. USMA Academic Board Minutes, 28 October 1839 and 15 November 1839, USMA Archives.
26. William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Boston: West and Richardson, 1815) p. 463.
27. Ibid., p. 465.
28. Ibid., pp. 386-87.
29. Ibid., p. 64.
30. Ibid.
31. James Kent, *Commentaries on American Law* (New York: O. Halsted, 1826), I, 45.
32. Ibid., I, 53.
33. Ibid., I, 89.
34. Ibid., I, 199.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., I, 179.
37. Jasper Adams to Major R. Delafield, 3 February 1840, in the Jasper Adams Papers, USMA Archives, Drawer F.
38. W. T. Sherman to John Sherman, 14 January 1840, Sherman Papers.
39. Lee placed second in "Natural and National Law and Ethics" in 1829; Jackson was fifth in 1846. Grant was below average in ethics, and Sheridan had to spend a fifth year at West Point because of problems in conduct. It is interesting to note that Sherman, Grant, and Sheridan all graduated from West Point as cadet privates due to excess demerits.
40. Lewis, p. 442.
41. W. T. Sherman to "My dear Sister," 16 January 1841, Sherman Papers.
42. Lewis, p. 68.
43. W. T. Sherman to John Sherman, 7 March 1840, Sherman Papers.
44. Photographs of Sherman's letter of resignation dated 18 January 1861 are in the USMA Library.
45. Walters, pp. 20-21.
46. Ibid, p. 22.
47. Ibid., p. 21; and W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 181.
48. Lewis, p. 188.
49. *The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: GPO, 1887), series 2, vol. 2, p. 814. (Hereinafter cited as *Official Records*).
50. Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, II, 11; *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 17, part 2, pp. 16-17.
51. W. T. Sherman to James Guthrie, 14 August 1864, cited in Lewis, p. 398.
52. Lewis, p. 442.
53. William S. McFeely, *Grant* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), p. 81.
54. Ibid., p. 78.
55. Thomas Jordan, *General Orders from Adjutant and Inspector General's Office, C.S. Army in 1862* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell, 1863), p. 66.
56. John F. Callan, *The Military Laws of the United States* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1863), p. 521.
57. Jordan, p. 68.
58. *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 17, part 2, p. 150.
59. Ibid., pp. 154-55.
60. Walters, pp. 57-58.
61. U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (London: Sampson Law, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1886), II, 507.
62. W. T. Sherman to John Sherman, 1 October 1862, in the USMA Library, LAC 11541 [Library of American Civilization, on microfiche], p. 166.
63. *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 17, part 2, pp. 261-62.
64. Ibid., p. 280.
65. Ibid., p. 307.
66. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 132, 208.
67. Cited in Archer Jones, "Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War, A Reinterpretation," *Military Affairs*, 34 (December 1970), 130.

68. Lewis, p. 424.

69. Vattel held that "the right to make war ceases upon the offer of just terms." Charles G. Fenwick, ed., *The Law of Nations* (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1916), p. 254.

70. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 138; and Charles C. Jones, *The Siege of Savannah* (Albany, N.Y.: Joel Munsell, 1874), p. 13.

71. Lewis, p. 423.

72. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 182-83.

73. Ibid., II, 233.

74. Ibid., II, 267.

75. Ibid., II, 175.

76. W. T. Sherman, "Address to the Army of the Potomac," *Army-Navy Journal*, 11 June 1881, p. 945.

77. Lewis, pp. 506-07.

78. Ibid., p. 508.

79. W. T. Sherman, "Address to the Army of the Potomac," p. 945.

80. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 287.

81. Ibid., II, 286.

82. Ibid., II, 211.

83. Lewis, pp. 509, 514.

84. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 347.

85. Ibid., II, 127.

86. Sherman proposed that the Confederate armies deposit their arms in their own state arsenals, that the officers and legislatures of the several states be recognized by the executive of the United States upon taking an oath to support the Constitution, and that the people be guaranteed their political rights and franchises under a general amnesty. Sherman saw these terms as effecting the will of Abraham Lincoln. The assassination of Lincoln led to their disapproval by President Johnson and Secretary Stanton. See Philemon Tecumseh Sherman, "Address to the Society of the Army of the Tennessee," p. 20, in the USMA Archives.

87. Lewis, p. 134.

88. Lewis, p. 332.

89. Lewis, p. 138; and W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 152, 167.

90. Philemon T. Sherman, p. 18.

91. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 279-80; Athearn, pp. 69-70, 131, 279; and Lewis, pp. 579-99.

92. Lewis, p. 332.

93. W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, xii. The quotation is the inscription on Sherman's statue in Washington. See also W. T. Sherman, *Address to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy, June 14, 1876* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1876), p. 26.

94. Cited in Archer Jones, "Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War," p. 130. See also Timothy H. Donovan et al., *The American Civil War* (West Point, N.Y.: USMA Department of History, 1980), p. 325.

95. McFeely, p. 188.

96. W. T. Sherman, *Address to the Graduating Class . . . June 14, 1876*, p. 29; and W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 126.

97. Cited in Joseph T. Durkin, *General Sherman's Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1959), p. 53.

98. Lewis, p. 138.

99. W. T. Sherman, "An Address Before the Graduating Class of the Michigan Military Academy, June 19, 1879," in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Christopher Morley (New York: Little, Brown, 1957), p. 366.