

The Influence of Sherman on American War Making

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“War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war into our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out. I know I had no hand in making this war, and I know I will make more sacrifices to-day than any of you to secure peace.” These are the words of General William Tecumseh Sherman, one of the leading Union figures of the American Civil War. General Sherman is a controversial figure in American history, a man who did much to hasten the end of the war, but who employed ruthless and destructive methods in order to attain this goal. Sherman was something of a conflicted person, a leader of war who professed almost pacifistic ideals for peace, a man who decried the hellish nature of war but who contributed to this nature through his own stratagems while in command. This duality of peace and destruction within Sherman assisted him in achieving success with his plans, and has impacted American military theory up to the current day. Sherman was the first American to practice the strategies he used, and following his successes such strategies would later become staples of American war making.

The Civil War was the United States’ first true total war. The first time that America had, in its totality, been required to commit such an extensive amount of manpower and resources and effort into a conflict. As well, no other war has caused such devastation to the United States, with hundreds of thousands of dead, large swathes of land despoiled, and entire cities burned or battered. Even the Second World War, undoubtedly the most terrible conflict in all the history of mankind, required a relatively and comparatively minor sacrifice of American blood. Sherman was well aware both of the total nature of the Civil War and also of the vast

cost it was inflicting upon the American people. It was these that convinced him to embark upon what he referred to as “hard war” in which he set his army upon the South with the goal of destroying not the Confederate armies, but the Southern people’s capacity and willpower to wage war. To this end he had his soldiers destroy telegraph wires and railways, burn factories and farms and homes, steal food and resources, and more. His methods left much of the South in utter ruin, intentionally leaving many tens of thousands of Southerners as refugees for whom life was unbearably difficult in the days following the passage of his army. However Sherman knew that these methods were necessary to ensure the defeat of the Confederacy, and that by inflicting pain in the short term he was ultimately sparing greater pain spread over the long term. This sort of thinking can be seen in many future American wars, most notably in the Second World War, in which America practiced Sherman’s style of warfare against countries in a manner that culminated in the atomic bombs. While vast numbers of people died and much damage was done, ultimately the war was ended sooner as a result.

Despite the brutality of Sherman’s war making upon the South, it was also characterized by more humane elements that set it as more than simple savagery. This is primarily seen in how while Sherman’s army terrorized the property and material wealth of the South, there were relatively few deaths inflicted. The civilian population may have been left poor and extremely uncomfortable, but they themselves were left untouched. In fact, when he burned the city of Atlanta, Sherman went out of his way to warn the population to evacuate, and in fact used his army to assist the process in order to ensure minimal damage to

the people. Even the material damage, while extensive, was largely confined to targets that could contribute some kind of practical value to the Confederate war effort. As well, once people surrendered to his army, he would go out of his way to show leniency, such as in Savannah where he enforced protection of the citizens and their property after they agreed to surrender bloodlessly. In Iraq, Vietnam, and in the aftermath of WWII this can be seen as well, with America attempting to rebuild and help the people in opposing nations once they had agreed to submit to American force of arms.

Sherman's tactics during his campaigns in the Civil War have impacted American Military theory ever since. He was the first American military leader to practice such a style of total war that targeted an opponent logistically, economically, and psychologically as well as militarily. Sherman's policies characterize the mindset of the American military ever after, do what has to be done, even if such requires brutality, in the name of achieving peace sooner and with as little loss of life as possible.