



# Lincoln Lore

September, 1986

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.  
Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the  
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.  
Copyright © 1986 Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

Number 1771

## SHERMAN: TIME FOR A NEW IMAGE?

An American journalist covering the Viet Nam War once described the mission of the United States in that unhappy southeast Asian country this way, "We were there to bring them the choice, bringing it to them like Sherman bringing the Jubilee through Georgia, clean through it, wall to wall with pacified indigenous and scorched earth." The war correspondent was Michael Herr, whose book *Dispatches*, in which the Sherman passage appears, is one of the most widely read and influential books on Viet Nam.

*Dispatches* is a present-minded book which aimed to capture the nightmare rhythms and atmosphere of the life of the American "grunt" in Viet Nam. Historical allusions are scarce, and the one to General William T. Sherman stands out. For the Civil War historian, the reference is like a pennant marking dangerous ground: we stand forewarned thereby that the reputation of a historical figure is about to change. Sherman will have to shoulder some of the burden of guilt for the conduct of the Vietnamese War.

*Dispatches* was first published in 1968, and Sherman's image has been looming ever larger ever since. By 1984 James Reston, Jr.'s lively and contentious book, *Sherman's March and Vietnam*, accepted much of what the high-brow military historians had been saying in the intervening years — that Sherman had "developed . . . a deliberate strategy of terror," as Russell F. Weigley described it in *The American Way of War*. Reston now filled a whole volume with the notion that Sherman's march from Atlanta constituted the distant birthplace of the least attractive aspects of American tactics in Viet Nam, symbolized by the My Lai massacre. In the same year that Reston's book was published, DaCapo put out a one-volume edition of the *Memoirs of General William*

*T. Sherman*, with a new introduction by Grant biographer William S. McFeely, another sign that Sherman was newly relevant for our times.



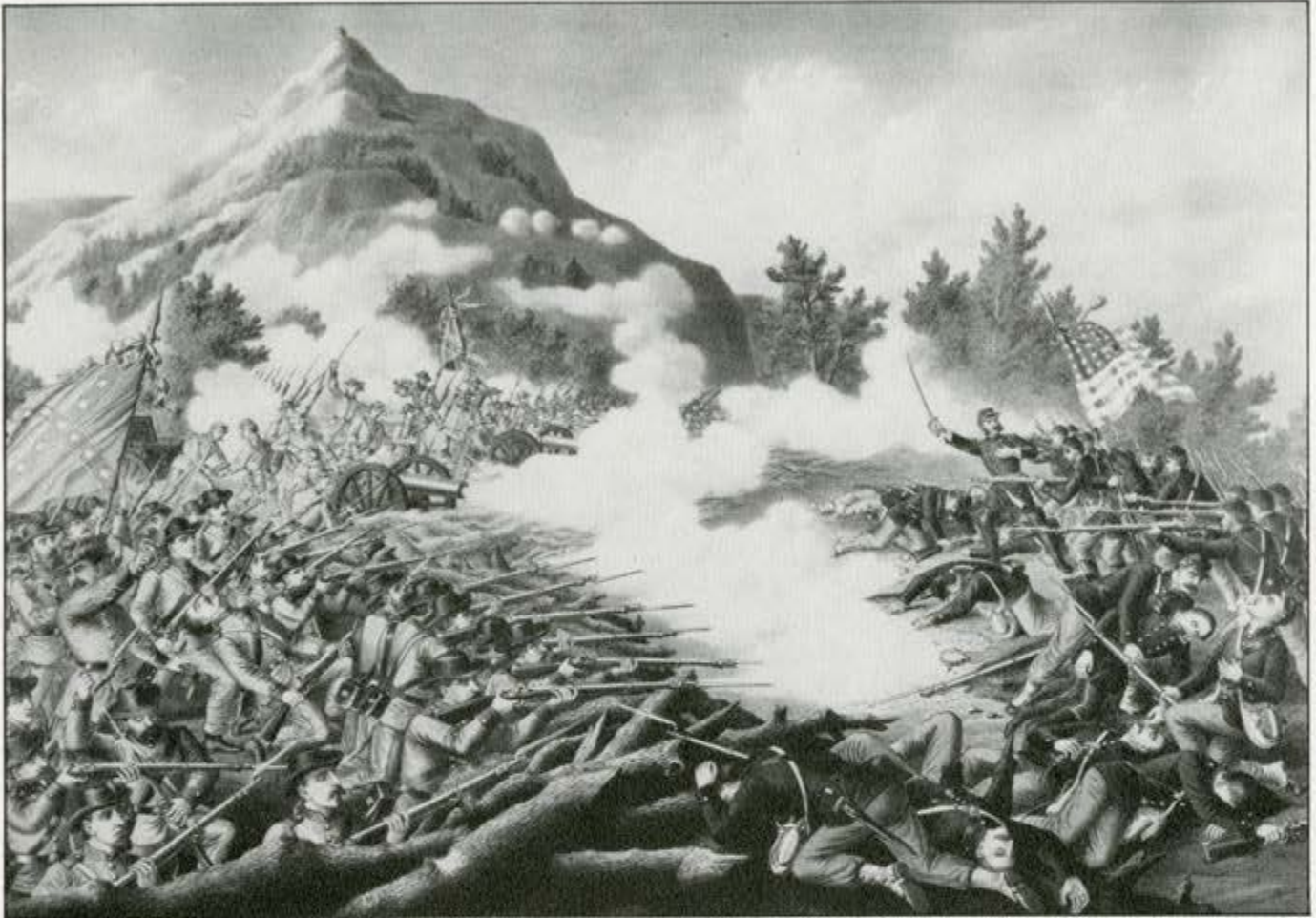
From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Edmund Wilson writes in *Patriotic Gore* of one of Sherman's howling quotations: "This is the Attila Sherman of Mathew Brady's horrendous and bristling photograph, taken just after the end of hostilities, to pose for which the General either could not or would not relax his fierce and obdurate frown or subdue the almost animal hackles of his fiery red hair." This is a beautifully written passage, as is always the case with Wilson, but poor Sherman could not help what he looked like. Besides, there were many Brady gallery portraits of Sherman, and some, like the one pictured here, conveyed a somewhat mellower image.

These memoirs do make especially interesting reading now that Sherman's reputation carries renewed impact, but they do not quite seem to be the work of the man recent historians have described to us. Primed by modern books on Sherman, their pages sprinkled with the words "terror" and "terrorizing," a reader of the memoirs naturally wants to see what Sherman thought he was doing. Moreover, one can realistically hope for candor from this tough-talker, despite his being a Victorian man. Sherman used probably the most appealingly direct language of any great Civil War general. "War . . . is all hell," he once said, and he had promised to "make Georgia howl" as he set out on his March to the Sea. In a frequently quoted letter written from Savannah, he told General Halleck, "We are not only fighting hostile armies but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as the organized armies." "We cannot change the hearts of those people of the South," he said on another occasion, "but we can make war so terrible . . . [and] make them so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it."

By the time one reaches chapter XXV in volume II entitled "Conclusion — Military Lessons of the War," one is expecting some pretty pithy stuff. But the general's conclusions prove to be rather tame. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The North had failed to prepare for war despite obvious Southern intentions to start one.
2. The optimum organization



*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

**FIGURE 2.** Kurz & Allison of Chicago produced a large series of popular chromolithographs of battles in the Civil War of which this depiction of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain was one. Sherman faced General Joseph E. Johnston in that battle on the route to Atlanta and suffered terrible casualties. For once, Kurz & Allison's absurdly rigid style was ironically appropriate to the scene, for Kennesaw Mountain saw Sherman fight in the traditional style of less celebrated Civil War generals.

of a regiment was in twelve rather than ten companies.

3. A regiment constitutes a "family," its colonel "the father," but the democratic principle should not extend to elections for captain; they should be appointed.

4. The best way to recruit during war is to fill vacancies in already existing regiments rather than to raise new ones.

5. Three pounds of food a day per man is an optimum ration, but if they think the commander has done his best to provide it, men will survive on a lot less.

6. Sherman disliked reliance on the U.S. Sanitary Commission because they tended to show favoritism, giving supplies raised from a particular state only to soldiers from that state.

7. Men in battle should never attend wounded friends. Preparing for a skirmish, a commander should designate musicians and others as medical aids with white arm bands. For larger battles, stretcher bearers and field hospitals must be designated beforehand — and trenches for the dead dug in advance.

8. Sherman even found something to say about regimental chaplains: they should attend burials and hospitals and convey details to the captain and to relatives at home.

9. Breech-firing arms, Sherman said in one of his less forward-looking conclusions, would mainly have the effect of increasing the amount of ammunition fired and therefore the amount necessary to be carried in an army's supply train. They

would also "thin out" the line of attack and make battles short and decisive (again, he was quite wrong). He cautioned that these weapons would "not in the least affect ground strategy, or the necessity for perfect organization, drill and discipline. The companies and battalions will be more dispersed, and the men will be less under the immediate eye of their officers, and therefore a higher order of intelligence and courage on the part of the individual soldier will be an element of strength."

10. Sherman predicted that the proportion of infantry, cavalry, and artillery in future armies would remain the same, though their roles would change. It was already so rare and hopeless for cavalry to charge infantry, that infantry no longer practiced forming squares, the famous tactic of Wellington's infantry at Waterloo. For infantry, the spade was now as necessary as the musket, especially on defense, but the use of the spade sometimes made attacking troops too slow to abandon their earthworks for attack.

12. An army did not need judge advocates in the field for trials; too many court martials were a sign of a poorly disciplined army.

13. Armies of the future should rely on the telegraph and notes carried by orderlies for communication. Flags and torches were too often obscured at crucial times by trees, fogs, and mists.

14. Railways would remain important, and Sherman

recommended building blockhouses to guard trestles and bridges.

15. He saw no change in the role of guards and pickets.

16. He opposed the separation of staff from line and did not believe in having a chief of staff at all.

17. Corps commanders should command their own supplies and not have to go through Washington bureaus to get them.

18. A general should command at the head of his army and not from the rear.

19. Mail service with the army should be maintained, but newspaper reporters were mischievous. He realized, however, that people back home were so eager for war news that a commander risked his own removal if he moved vigorously to rid his army of journalists.

*C'est tout.* Those were the great Sherman's conclusions from his vast and innovative experience of war. They were rewarding enough for readers in the late nineteenth century, perhaps, especially for practical soldiers. But they are pretty disappointing to a historian living in the late twentieth century, for these were the dicta of a conventional general interested in fighting stand-up battles of a traditional sort with other conventional generals. There is hardly a hint or clue about what would come in World War I — aside from the almost apologetic mention of the spade — and absolutely nothing of lightning war or total war or terrorism.

Of course, it could well be the case that Sherman was better at fighting than at describing how he fought. Southerners always held the view that Sherman was, in modern language, a terrorist, and he may have been a little more sensitive about the changes than is sometimes thought. Still, there seems quite a gulf between the general's conclusions and those that historians have arrived at in writing about him.

Indeed, Russell Weigley seemed aware of the disparity between the historians' Sherman and the general who talks to us with seeming candor in his memoirs. In a footnote which stretches out over a page in length in *The American Way of War*, Weigley wrestled with these differences, but they seem not to have altered the main thrust of the historian's text. General Sherman there marches to the sea and beyond in "campaigns of terror and destruction," and the American Civil War descends "into remorseless revolutionary struggle." President Lincoln "had to abandon nearly all his hopes for [sectional] reconciliation, and even for rational control over the shape and momentum of the war."

It would be a curious history of the Civil War which depicted Lincoln and Sherman at cross purposes. The president carried a copy of Sherman's orders for the March to the Sea in his wallet at Ford's Theatre. Sherman's policy was Lincoln's policy.

But it was not the policy which has generally been attributed to Sherman by historians writing since the Viet Nam War. Even Reston has to admit the glaring difference: "While the casualties of the Civil War were staggering (close to six hundred thousand), at least 90 percent of them were soldiers. In nuclear war, over 90 percent of the casualties would be civilian."

William T. Sherman made war on civilian property, all right, but not on civilians themselves. Though it was a strategy not much used in land warfare at the time, Sherman's campaign in Georgia and the Carolinas hardly exemplified any military principle not implicit in the naval blockade, a very old and formalistic means of war.

And suddenly modern writers are beginning to glimpse this. In the Fall 1986 issue of *Foreign Policy*, constitutional law professor Christopher H. Pyle discusses the modern problem



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. A more typical depiction of the work of Sherman's troops might be this engraving by Alexander H. Ritchie, with its stormy images of fire, destruction, and refugees.

of terrorism and its definition. In the course of criticizing the current definition used by the administration in Washington, Professor Pyle slips in an important aside:

Lying behind the administration's insistence that rebels do not deserve U.S. respect until they fight like an army is a certain nostalgia for the American Revolution and the clean military tactics of [George] Washington. If Washington could win primarily by engaging large military units in relatively unpopulated areas, so can everyone else who deserves to triumph.

Yet modern revolutionaries cannot realistically be held to Washington's standards. Given the density of modern populations and the capabilities of modern armies and police forces, today's rebels are usually compelled to fight as guerrillas from within the civilian populace, with all the risks to innocent life which that entails. Further, to reject urban guerrilla warfare as a morally impermissible means of revolt loads the law squarely in favor of whatever regime happens to be in power.

It is time to admit that the American Revolution — and the American Civil War — were unusual occurrences.

Contrary to the American experience, most internal conflicts are truly civil wars, fought within the populace by irregular forces motivated by deep religious, ethnic, or tribal animosities.

And the American Civil War! Whatever the merits of this passage as analysis of a contemporary problem, it certainly portends a very new and different picture for Sherman and the American Civil War.

The American Civil War now seems not at all to resemble a remorseless revolutionary struggle. Soldiers fought soldiers and war became "total" in the 1860s only in the not very exciting sense that it brought more economic hardship to the homefront than wars had done in the eighteenth century. William T. Sherman — and his commander in chief Abraham Lincoln — were, by modern standards, rather gentle Victorian gentlemen who did not consciously deal in terror of the sort the twentieth century was to witness.

Look for a new image of Sherman to emerge from history books — as one of the last and best of the old generals and not one of the first and most frightful of the new.

## LOOKING AT PICTURES

Many readers of *Lincoln Lore* Number 1770 (August 1986) were probably struck by the familiarity of the image in one of the French cartoons depicted in that issue. Cham's drawing suggesting that Abraham Lincoln's reelection in 1864 was a rude mortar shell bursting upon the Confederacy utilized a familiar device in American Civil War cartoons. Indeed, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* had recently used the idea to show Lincoln's renomination for the presidency as a shell landing in Jefferson Davis' dining room.

Projectiles filled the air of the United States during the Civil

War, and it is hardly surprising to find that cartoonists thought of them as symbolic devices. Nor would it be surprising to find that France's clever caricaturists had thought of the idea as well. Still, the coincidence may indicate a fairly high degree of intercontinental artistic cross-fertilization in the popular illustrated newspapers of the mid-nineteenth century. The speed of transference, if transference there was in this case, seems remarkable as well. Intercontinental missiles appear to have travelled fast in the nineteenth century, too.

