WILLIAM T. SHERMAN: MYTH AND REALITY

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To the average American, William Tecumseh Sherman is a one-dimensional figure. His image is that of the remorseless destroyer of southern homes, a merciless brute, an unfeeling bringer of fire and sword to the interior of the Confederacy. Even the most popular photograph of him, though hardly the only available one, seems to show such a person. This is the picture that you've all seen. It appears in books and on television programs like Ken Burns's Civil War television series and the A and E television network's weekly "Civil War Journal." And it appears on the program for this meeting. It shows a disheveled hard cruel soldier, a stare in his eye that is disconcerting even across the centuries.

In American folklore, Sherman is not a person; he is a myth. Sherman and the alleged fiery destruction of Atlanta is as much a part of American folklore as George Washington and the fictitious cherry tree, Abner Doubleday and the contrived story of the invention of baseball in Cooperstown, New York, and Abraham Lincoln and his alleged long hike to repay a customer he had supposedly shortchanged while a clerk in a local store. Each of these tales has a purpose behind it. George Washington always told the truth and so should every American child. Baseball was an American creation, not a game which evolved from the despised British; Honest Abe should be president because he was so honest; And William T. Sherman was a brute who exemplified what those evil Yankees really were like (as

contrasted with the saintly Lee who exemplified southern virtue.)[1]

Since I began working on Sherman some thirty years ago, I have been intrigued by reactions to him and reactions to me because of my research on him. I remember reading in a 1980s newspaper about two elderly Washington women of southern origin, telling a newsman how they had grown up in Mississippi hating Yankees because of the Civil War. As they had grown older and realized they were getting ever closer to meeting their maker, one said she had come to realize that such blind hatred was wrong; she allowed forgiveness to enter her heart, she said. But "that stinking Sherman," the other one suddenly blurted out to the surprised reporter, "I right now hate his guts. I've got to forgive him before I die."[2]

Some people have grown angry at me simply for daring to write a book about Sherman. Mississippi State University, my academic home for the past 20 years, has been most supportive, from the president on down to the freshmen and women in my classes. But a few other people have been less happy about my research interests. Just before my biography of William T. Sherman appeared in 1992, a reporter for Mississippi's major newspaper, wrote a favorable column about it. Very soon there appeared a letter to the editor. In the letter, the writer excoriated Sherman, called the columnist a scalawag, and ended with the words: "As an alumnus of Mississippi State University, I am ashamed that John Marszalek is a member of the faculty."[3]

A week later, another letter appeared, this time in the Memphis newspaper. This writer, responding to a favorable review of the book in an earlier edition of the paper, was, unlike the first writer, not ashamed of me or my university; he was merely "amazed" that I, an MSU Faculty member, would write a book about such a man.[4]

Both the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* and the *Wall Street Journal* published feature news articles about the book, which articles went out over the wire and appeared in newspapers all over the nation. More comments resulted. A North Carolinian concluded that southerners should be "thankful [that] the Zippo lighter had not yet been invented for there probably would be no South today." A fellow Mississippian, a museum director, said that hell had to exist; otherwise where would Sherman be. One Atlanta lawyer said that Sherman was a war criminal and those who defended him had "a streak of hooliganism, brigandage, and vandalism" in them too. An individual from Texas even wrote the president of Mississippi State telling him that he, as head of the University, owed the entire South an apology for my publishing a biography of such an awful man.[5]

The interesting thing about these and other such reactions to my Sherman biography is that, in each case, the writers are not reacting to what's in my book (because most never read it). They are reacting instead to their perceived image of Sherman. To them, it does not matter what is in my book or any book; no one should ever write any book about that awful Sherman.

I must admit that, when I first began researching Sherman many years ago at the University of Notre Dame, the Sherman myth constituted my view of the man. Quickly, however, I saw the inaccuracy of this view. The individual I found in his voluminous correspondence and in the attitude toward him by contemporaries in both the North and the South caused me to rethink this image I shared with most Americans.[6] Sherman was no unthinking, unfeeling monster, I found; he was a human being neither all evil, nor all good. As in everyone of us who share the human condition, there were elements in Sherman of both good and bad.

I did not write my Sherman biography to prove or disprove Sherman's goodness or evil. I simply wanted to do what any fair-minded historian wants to do in any book: tell the accurate story of the subject under study, and let the reader decide what he or she finally thinks it all means.

I came to believe my approach may have worked when I received a very brief letter from a woman in the Midwest. She told me that her recently deceased husband, like Sherman, had lost his father at an early age. All their married life there had been things about her husband that she had never quite understood, she said. After reading in my book how Sherman's life in his foster family had affected him, she came to understand her deceased husband in a way she never had before. Clearly to her, Sherman was no myth; he was a real human being she could relate to.[7]

So, if the myth is false, what was William T. Sherman really like?[8] First of all, he was an individual of deep feeling. All his life, he had a fear of failure, a determination to show his foster father, Thomas Ewing, and his wife, Ellen Ewing, his foster sister, that he could stand on his own two feet. All his life he worried about financial disaster overwhelming him. He felt insecure always, constantly concerned that, no matter what he did, it would not be good enough; his life would come crashing down around his ears the way his family had suddenly disintegrated at the unexpected death of his father when he was a nine year old boy. He searched for order in everything he did, seeing that as the only guarantee of personal survival, but never reaching that impossible ideal.

Failure seemed to dog his every step. In his early years, he spent the Mexican War in the back water of California, while colleagues were winning military glory in the main theater of the war; he failed as a San Francisco and New York banker, and as a lawyer and real estate agent in Kansas. When he finally seemed to have hit his stride as

founding superintendent of the Louisiana Military Seminary (today's Louisiana State University), his strong belief in the Union forced him to resign and return to Ohio. His greatest disappointment came during the war, however. His ten year old son, Willy, died during an 1863 family visit to Mississippi just after Vicksburg's capture. The boy's death broke Sherman's heart, and he never fully recovered from the loss of this, his favorite, child.

As a sensitive man and as a result of such failure and disappointments, Sherman was often in a blue mood, sometimes terribly depressed. But he also had a well developed sense of humor and an ability to connect with all kinds of people, and this helped steady his disposition. When he toured Europe in the post-war years, he felt very much at home with kings, generals, and even a pope. No one ever awed him. Yet, those who knew him best, both in the war and during times of peace, always commented on his lack of pretension and his concern for the common man. He remained "Uncle Billy" to his troops, even when they were all old men. He regularly rode the elevated trains when he lived in New York City during his retirement, contentedly rubbing elbows with the city's working classes.

The story that best describes this characteristic concerns his visit to a Yale University commencement ceremony in the 1870s. University officials fluttered around Sherman trying to make sure he was given all the special privilege they thought his rank and station required. How did he react? The first chance he had, he snuck away from the boring commencement speeches. Out on the school grounds, he ran into a recently released work house inmate, a black man. He offered the poor man a cigar, then sat down next to him on a park bench happily striking up an animated conversation, the two men contentedly puffing away on their stoogies while Yale administrators looked on with astonishment.[9]

Even his former enemies found him a generous likable person. Sherman and Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston became fast friends after the war, their friendship aided in no small measure by their mutual dislike of Jefferson Davis. When Confederate General John Bell Hood experienced financial problems in the post-war years, Sherman took it upon himself to try to help relieve the general's monetary distress by selling Hood's personal papers for him. When common Confederate soldiers came to Sherman for help in the post-war years, and more than a few did, he responded as he did for the destitute former "boys" from his old army. He made them sandwiches in his kitchen, loaned them money, and even publicly recommended that they be allowed into the Soldiers Homes established for Union veterans. Whenever Sherman visited the South he received a courteous, frequently warm, reception. In 1879 he was wined and dined as he retraced the path of his wartime exploits though the former Confederacy. In Atlanta, leading citizens asked his advice on the city's economic future, and during the New Orleans Mardi Gras of that year, he was the honored guest of Rex.[10]

In addition to possessing personally appealing qualities, Sherman was an individual of great mental capacity, prodigious intellectual curiosity, and down-to-earth tastes. He was one of the nation's leading orators, and his memoirs are considered among the best in American history. His letters to a wide variety of correspondents are full of insight and wit. For example, he discussed law with Supreme Court justice Stephen J. Field and history with George Bancroft and Columbia University historian John W. Draper. He discussed agriculture with a leading California grape grower and an Agriculture Department scientist. He could remember geographical features decades later, this ability helping him during the Atlanta campaign and the March to the Sea. He regularly quoted Shakespeare and had a

passion for the theater. Yet he also loved P.T. Barnum's circus and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Most of all he loved sitting around a campfire somewhere out-west, swapping tall tales with the mighty and the common far into the night.

But Sherman also had a temper which he displayed not only to people he disliked but also to his family and his friends. He frequently castigated his wife Ellen at the dinner table for what he considered her spendthrift ways, but she gave back as well as she took. When, in opposition to his wishes, his son Tommy decided to become a Catholic priest, a Jesuit no less, Sherman angrily denounced him and refused to attend the ordination. His daughter's refusal to share with her sisters the huge diamond necklace she had received as a wedding gift from the Khedive of Egypt brought forth a stern lecture on proper family etiquette. During the post-war years when Jefferson Davis made derogatory statements about Abraham Lincoln and Union leadership in general, Sherman lashed back, angrily denouncing Davis and getting into a name calling match with him. When other Union veterans disagreed with him about aspects of Civil War fighting, Sherman did not hesitate to assail them, too.

Above all else, however, Sherman was a soldier. He was a successful military leader who took war to a new level of violence --- an attack on the hearts and minds and property of civilians. But he did not destroy to inflict unnecessary cruel pain. He did it to try to end the war as quickly as possible with the least loss of life. Sherman had spent many of his pre-Civil War years in the South, as an army officer in Florida, Alabama, and Missouri, in Charleston's Fort Moultrie, in New Orleans, and as superintendent of the Louisiana Military Seminary in Alexandria, Louisiana. He made many southern friends, so popular in Louisiana in 1861, in fact, that friends there

wanted him to join the Confederate military. Despite his affection for the region and its people, however, he could not remain in the South once secession came. His perception of the Union as the bedrock of the order that he believed society as a whole and he personally needed to succeed gave him no choice. He had to return to the North. Like Robert E. Lee, Sherman had to make a hard decision.

He continued his affection for his southern friends, however, and this attitude caused him to try to avoid blood letting as much as he could, substituting property damage for death. He wanted southerners to quit, short of losing their lives. Difficult as it may seem to believe, Sherman's march to the sea was more a mark of his humanity than of any planned brutality. The march actually caused fewer casualties than most individual Civil War battles. Around 4,100 casualties occurred on both sides during the six week long march to the sea compared to 24,000 casualties in just the two days of Shiloh and 51,000 in three days at Gettysburg.[11]

Sherman's attitude toward what historian Charles Royster has called "destructive war"[12] can best be seen in a letter he wrote to his oldest daughter just before he began his Meridian Mississippi Campaign in early 1864, his first application of this kind of warfare of terror. In every one of the battles he now fought, he wrote to Minnie Sherman, he found himself fighting "some of the very families in whose homes I used to spend some happy days" in South Carolina and Louisiana. "Of course I must fight them when the time comes," he said, "but wherever a result can be accomplished without battle I prefer it." He had become convinced that the best way to fight war was to destroy property, to break the Confederate will, and to avoid the pitched battles that resulted in huge casualties.[13]

After he defeated the Confederate army and captured Atlanta by means of the conventional warfare he so disliked,

he made the final decision to try to avoid further such combat and institute a war against property and the Confederate will. He decided to repeat the successful Meridian Campaign on a grander strategic scale by marching to the sea, living off the land, destroying anything of war-making potential, terrorizing the populace along the way, and positioning himself on the Atlantic coastline to march north toward Lee's army in Virginia. The march to the sea, he always insisted, was nothing but a change of base from Atlanta to Savannah. It was that, of course, but in reality it was even more the elevation of destructive war to a new level of effectiveness. When he completed the march successfully, he immediately repeated it by marching through the Carolinas. The result: he broke the will of the Southern populace and military; he did it with minimum casualties on both sides; and he helped bring the war to a quicker end.

But he also sowed the seeds for the later harsh myth. Who has not seen the incredible scene of Atlanta burning in "Gone With the Wind," a scene that has riveted the image of Sherman as the heartless destroyer into the American mind. In reality, as Sherman enjoyed pointing out during his 1879 and 1881 visits to Atlanta, there were still many ante-bellum buildings standing, an impossibility if he had indeed burned the entire city to the ground in 1864.[14]

The destruction that took place during the march to the sea and through the Carolinas was enormous, and Sherman never made any excuses about what his army did. But it is historically important to note that he did not conduct a scorched earth policy. Many private dwellings in the path of his army remained standing. And though his army did most of the destruction, it did not do it all. Union and Confederate deserters, escaped slaves, unscrupulous civilians, and elements of Confederate Joe Wheeler's cavalry did their share, too.

What is not generally remembered today, though recognized in the 19th century, was that when Sherman completed his march to the sea, when he took Savannah, his "hard" war instantly ceased. He now instituted in Savannah the "soft" peace he had promised awaited those who quit fighting and returned to the Union. After the march through the Carolinas, he met with Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and tried to institute a peace treaty that was so generous to the South that his own government, reeling from the Lincoln assassination, accused him of being a traitor.

During reconstruction, Sherman was probably the leading northern advocate of the southern position on the issues of the day. He defended slavery as he always had and only reluctantly accepted its demise. He believed the South should return to the control of its traditional pre-war leaders. He totally opposed the idea of black voters, and the concept of black office holders was far beyond his comprehension. He often called himself the South's best friend, and many southerners agreed with him. He was so vocally pro-southern that, in 1872, some southern newspapers boomed him for the presidency, and the later Adjutant General of the United Confederate Veterans, George Moorman, was a regular friendly correspondent who supported the idea.[15]

In conclusion, Sherman was not the unfeeling brute visualized in the still-existing Sherman myth. In reality, he was a complicated human being who was modern yet conservative, harsh but gentle, pro-northern yet pro-southern, psychological warrior and peacenik.

But what about the continuing myth? Sherman did cause a great deal of destruction in breaking the southern will, but it was all done with the purpose of ending the war as quickly as possible. He killed and maimed far fewer Confederates in the process than he would have done, or

other Civil War generals did, in pitched battles. Unfortunately for Sherman's image, however, later generations have seen martial glory in dying at Grant's hand in the Wilderness or at Lee's order at Gettysburg, but have seen no such glory in not being able to keep Sherman's army from destroying property and terrorizing people in the heart of the Confederacy. Sherman was so powerful a psychological warrior, that he has continued to affect the southern mind long after the war ended. The myth of what he was, therefore, will probably continue to overwhelm his true reality for many more years. As historian Paul Buck once wrote, "Sherman personified all the South had suffered,"[16]

Were Sherman alive today, he would probably find it all very puzzling. After all in the years immediately after the war, he rarely experienced such animosity. But he would probably just shrug his shoulders, and perhaps quote once again Hamlet's last words as he quoted them in an 1881 speech: "... Horatio, I am dead, Thou livest; report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied." [17]

NOTES

1. For an excellent collection of essays dealing with myth in American history and suitable for classroom use, see Nicholas Cords and Patrick Gerster, *Myth and the American Experience*, 3rd ed,. 2 vols. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). For an earlier discussion of the Sherman myth, see John F. Marszalek, "Was Sherman Really A Brute?" *Blue and Gray* 7 (December 1989): 46-51.

2. Jackson (MS) *Clarion Ledger*, 18 April 1987.

3. *Ibid.*, 23 November, 7 December 1992.

4. Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 29 November, 13 December 1992.

5. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 22 December 1992, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 1993; newspapers all over the nation reprinted an article by Allen Norwood which first appeared in the Charlotte *Observer* and was sent out over the Associated Press wire. For example this article appeared on the front page of the Memphis *Commercial_Appeal*, 9 July 1993. -- to President of Mississippi State University, 10 June 1993, copy in author's possession.

6. Major Sherman collections are housed in the Archives of the University of Notre Dame, the Library of Congress, and the Ohio Historical Society, Columbus. For a listing of all the repositories containing Sherman material. see the bibliography to John F. Marszalek, *Sherman, A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York: The Free Press. 1993; paperback, New York: Vintage Press, 1994).

7. --- to author, 26 July 1993, in possession of author.

8. Unless otherwise noted, this analysis is based on the Sherman biography listed in note 6.

9. St. Louis *Republican*, 21 February 1891, in P. Tecumseh Sherman Scrapbook, William T Sherman Papers, Ohio Historical Society; see also Marszalek, *Sherman*, 401-02.

10. John F. Marszalek, "Celebrity in Dixie: Sherman Tours the South, 1879," *Georgia_Historical Quarterly* 66 (Fall 1982): 368-83.

11. Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901).

12. Charles Royster, *The Destructive War, William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans*. (New York: Knopf, 1991).

13. William T. Sherman to Maria Ewing (Minnie) Sherman, 19 January 1864, William T. Sherman Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus; see also in Marszalek, *Sherman*, 249.

14. See William T. Sherman to Captain J.F. Burke, Gate City Guards, Atlanta, 10 March 1880, William T. Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

15. Letters from Moorman to Sherman are part of the William T. Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

16. Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion* (Boston: Little Brown, 1937), 49.

17 ."Third Regular Toast: The Army and the Navy," Annual Meeting of the Society of the Army of the Potomac, 8 June 1881, William T. Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.