

AN UNSETTLING PRECEDENT

An Examination of General Philip H. Sheridan's Effect on the American Civil War

Humanity's story unravels itself in the fashion of a grand stage-play. Heroes rise and fall; villains weave in and out of the plot; individual storylines become entangled with the metanarrative and out of the chaos emerges a single, complex drama. Support of that over-hanging narrative drives the story along, allowing opportunities for legendary failure or historic triumphs. Amidst bitter civil war tearing apart the United States in the 1860's, the military's concept of total war began to reach new heights. Disregarding the 1806 American Articles of War that condemned non-combatant involvement in warfare, Union troops implemented force against the enemy's civilian population and their resources.¹ Thoroughly effective in demoralizing both Confederate states and troops, the strategy eliminated any and all means of sustaining everyday life, much less military movements, in some areas. Total war was not a new military strategy by any means, but Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman are most often accredited with successfully employing such strategies against the South. As a result, the two are also seen as key figures in the undermining of the Confederacy and in the evolution of the total war concept during the American Civil War.² However, there was an earlier, precedent-setting total war campaign that would allow Sherman's 1864 March to the Sea to have the devastating effect it did. On General Grant's orders, General Philip Sheridan devastated Virginia's Shenandoah Valley in his 1864 autumn campaign.³ According to historian and author Gary Gallagher, Sheridan's siege of the valley, ". . . . Constituted the first large scale demonstration that the strategy of exhaustion could accomplish the psychological and logistical damage envisioned by Grant."⁴ Even though General Sherman's March was a major

¹ Lance Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War 1860-1880." *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 59, No. 1 (1995): 8-10.

² Lisa M. Brady, "The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War." *Environmental History* Vol. 10, No. 3 (2005); 433-441.

³ Shenandoah at War National Historic District. "Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign." Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation. <http://www.shenandoahatwar.org/The-History/The-Campaigns/Sheridans-1864-Shenandoah-Campaign> (accessed November 30, 2012). This source was used to ensure the accurate use of the dates of Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864.

⁴ Brady, 434.

contribution to the Union victory, General Sheridan had a greater effect on the outcome of the American Civil War through his development and display of an effective exhaustive warfare precedent. Embracing Grant's vision of a total warfare strategy, he developed and displayed what was possible through the implementation of such tactics; future Union military actions contributing to the fall of the Confederacy would be influenced by the precedent of 1864 Shenandoah Campaign and bring about the eventual end of the war.

Sheridan's success in creating an effective total war model during the Shenandoah Campaign stemmed from Grant's vision of what a total war strategy could accomplish. In his 1864 instructions to General Sheridan concerning the Shenandoah Campaign, Grant orders in no uncertain terms for the destruction of the valley; the nature and tone of his orders allude to the potential he sees in applying a total war strategy and how he believes his objective should be achieved. "Grant had ordered the destruction in his initial instructions to Sheridan. 'Nothing should be left to invite the enemy to return.'"⁵ The orders suggest a shift in military tactic and principle from strictly armed confrontation to undermining the forces sustaining the enemy. But instead of following the age old logistical strategy of merely cutting off military supply lines, Grant turned his attention to the whole population of the Confederacy and its sustaining resources; tone in the orders carries a sense of finality and hostility, implying to Sheridan that he was to break the morale of the enemy through destruction of the valley. General Grant's message to General Sheridan was clear: destroy their foundation. During Sheridan's campaign in the late autumn of 1864, ". . . the Valley of the Shenandoah from Winchester to Staunton, a distance of ninety-two miles, was so much desolated as to make it necessary to issue at the present time a small number of rations."⁶

⁵ Wheelan, Joseph. "The Burning: Phil Sheridan determined to show the Rebels a hot time in the Shenandoah Valley." *America's Civil War, Vol. 2, No. 5* (2012): 40.

⁶ The Valley of the Shadow Project Digital Archive. <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/>
A letter from Philip H. Sheridan to General Ulysses S. Grant in request of rations and a way to support residents of the Shenandoah Valley during the winter following his campaign. Written January 25, 1865.

Successful implementation of this strategic concept by Sheridan set the standard of efficacy that Grant would measure other campaigns of the same sort against. In a letter written to General Sherman during the spring of 1865, Grant expressed his approval of the campaign through the valley. “Sheridan has made his raid and with splendid success so far as heard. . . You will see from the papers what Sheridan has done.”⁷ The unique contrast between Grant’s positive affirmation of Sheridan’s actions and the reports of the devastation from both Union soldiers and valley inhabitants alike displays what Grant perceived as a successful total war campaign. From the standpoint of the inhabitants of the Shenandoah Valley at the time, Grant’s vision of total war could effectively be summed up in what became their shorthand name for the destruction—“The Burning.”⁸ Homes, store houses and barns lay in ruins along with destroyed farm fields.⁹ Their desperate situation and the brutality of Sheridan’s strategy was apparent even to the Union soldiers carrying out the orders; a soldier reported in his writings, ““It was a phase of warfare we had not seen before . . .and though we admitted its necessity, we could not but sympathize with the sufferers.””¹⁰ Grant expressing his approval of how Sheridan fulfilled his strategic vision during the campaign set a standard for other generals on what total war could accomplish and the manner in which it should be achieved.

Public perspective on the potentials of war was also swayed by the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign. The absolute devastation left in Sheridan’s wake in terms of non-combatants, soldiers and their resources demonstrated the degree to which armies were now willing to wage war. According to historian Lance Janda, involving citizens in warfare was a radical concept during the Civil War as it challenged Enlightenment influenced beliefs that non-combatants should be spared of the direct effects of war.¹¹ The

⁷ The Valley of the Shadow Project Digital Archive. <http://vshadow.vcdh.virginia.edu/>
A letter from General Ulysses S. Grant to General William T. Sherman written on March 16, 1865. Grant reports on his recent activities and remarks about General Sheridan’s movements.

⁸ Joseph Wheelan. “The Burning: Phil Sheridan determined to show the Rebels a hot time in the Shenandoah Valley.” *America’s Civil War, Vol. 2, No. 5* (2012): 42.

⁹ Brady, Lisa M. “The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War.” *Environmental History Vol. 10, No. 3*(2005): 434-35.

¹⁰ Wheelan, 42.

¹¹ Lance Janda. “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War 1860-1880.” *The Journal of Military History Vol. 59, No. 1* (1995); 8.

valley campaign constituted not only an assault on the resources supporting the Confederate army, but on the sustenance-producing abilities of the inhabitants of the Shenandoah Valley region as well. When this occurred, it branded with intent an entire region as the enemy regardless of combatant or non-combatant status. His brutal approach to raiding and ransacking the valley signaled a shift in the mentality of war that ignored, “. . . codes of behavior developed during the Enlightenment; codes which attempted to spare civilians the travesties of war.”¹²

Such a shift also acted as a milestone in the evolution American military strategy, defining an entire population as hostile as opposed to focusing solely on its armed forces. Removing the environmental life-force of the region’s inhabitants in such a violent manner established a shocking precedent of the capabilities of total war. Regionally reflecting this new perception was the new name coined for the campaign by the residents of the Shenandoah Valley at the time. “The Burning” testified to the devastation of the valley and Sheridan’s chosen method of destroying anything of use to enemy forces and their population.¹³ Sheridan’s campaign shaped the social concept of total war by establishing a psychological association between the act of total war, those affected by it and those perpetrating it.¹⁴ A primitive but effective tactic, it created an eerie, imposing image of the new nature of war. “The

atmosphere, from horizon to horizon, has been black with the

Figure 1.



Sherman at Atlanta from September to November of 1864. Source: Atlanta, Ga. The shell-damaged Ponder House. <http://memory.loc.gov/>. Photograph by George N. Barnard. (1864).

¹² Lance Janda. “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War 1860-1880.” *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 59, No. 1 (1995): 8.

¹³ The Valley of the Shadow Project Digital Archive. <http://vshadow.vcdh.virginia.edu/>
A letter from General Sheridan to General Halleck reporting on the military situation in the Shenandoah Valley after the 1864 campaign. The letter catalogues damages inflicted on enemy stores and resources. Written March 1865, received March 8th, 1865. This source was cross referenced with Lisa M. Brady’s article “The Wilderness of War,” Joseph Wheelan’s article “The Burning” for consistency.

¹⁴ Joseph Wheelan, “The Burning: Phil Sheridan determined to show the Rebels a hot time in the Shenandoah Valley.” *America’s Civil War*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (2012):42.

smoke of a hundred conflagrations, and at night a gleam brighter and more lurid than sunset has shot from every verge. . .The completeness of the devastation is awful.”¹⁵ Once seared into the minds of the public, the message portrayed by images of a desolate and burning Shenandoah would carry over to military actions proceeding Sheridan’s campaign. War was now at home, not on some distant battlefield. Reflecting Sheridan’s tactics, Sherman’s 1864 March to the Sea burned nearly anything of potential use to Confederate forces and left complete ruin in his path (Figure 1).¹⁶ Brutal, scorched-earth tactics used in the Shenandoah Campaign demonstrated what Grant’s strategic vision was capable of. Both the armed forces and non-combatant populations of the Union and Confederacy had been given a shocking glimpse at what warfare had evolved into.

Under Sheridan’s command, the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign became a catalyst for military campaigns implementing the new extent of total war. Campaigns following suit of Sheridan’s ruthless attack of the Shenandoah Valley, like Sherman’s March to the Sea, would ultimately bring about the fall of the Confederacy. As a precedent setting campaign, Sheridan’s 1864 actions were endorsed by both Grant and Lincoln as acceptable means of utilizing total warfare in military maneuvers. Particularly in the case of Sherman’s March to the Sea, military and administrative approval of such brutal tactics had influenced the nature of raiding strategies and behaviors after the Shenandoah Campaign; whereas previous military strategies attempted to exclude civilians from direct military influence, now they were a focal point in undermining enemy logistical support. President Lincoln’s administrative endorsement of this approach came in the form of a letter to General Sheridan, praising his efforts in the duration of the campaign. “With great pleasure I tender to you, and your brave army, the thanks of the nation, and my own personal admiration and gratitude for the month’s operation, in the Shenandoah Valley. . .”¹⁷

Military approval came from General Grant, implying in a letter to Sherman in the spring of 1865 how he

¹⁵ Wheelan, 42.

¹⁶ Lisa M. Brady, “The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War.” *Environmental History* Vol. 10, No. 3(2005): 436.

¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov/> President Lincoln sent a letter of thanks to General Sheridan on October 22, 1864 for the actions of his troops during the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign.

wished his strategic vision to be executed by offering Sheridan's successful campaign as standard to be measured against. "Sheridan has made his raid and with splendid success so far as heard. . . You will see from the papers what Sheridan has done."¹⁸ Challenging traditional codes of military conduct allowed Sheridan to model the level devastation possible through a total war strategy and how far the effects could extend.

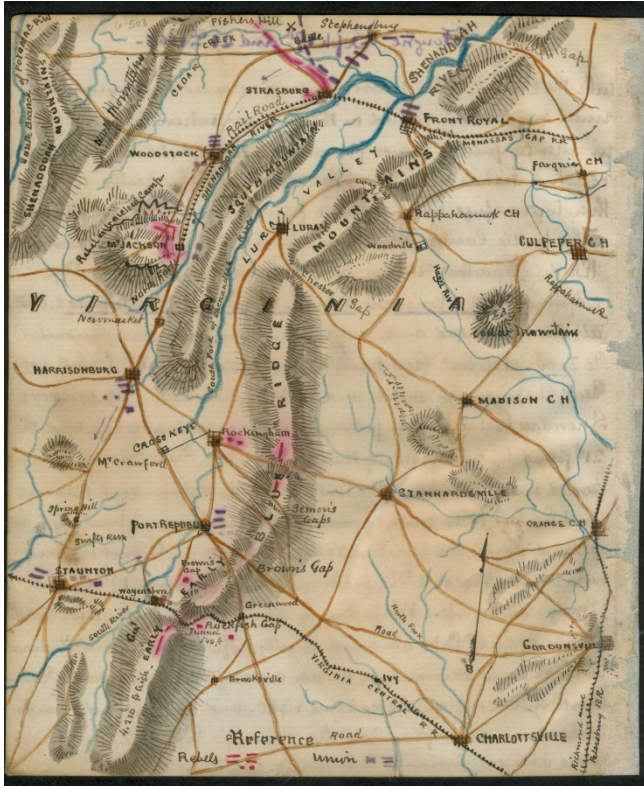
General William T. Sherman came to utilize aspects of this model during his 1864 March to the Sea; several tactical characteristics of his campaign reflected General Sheridan's precedent, taking the newly established standard of American total war to new heights. Similar to the Shenandoah Campaign, Sherman's march through the South to the Carolinas employed the use of fire as a tool for destroying structures and arable land that had any potential of supporting enemy forces.¹⁹ Unlike Sheridan's campaign, though, Sherman's use of fire was aimed at undermining Confederate economic activities through the destruction of factories, textile mills, cotton bales, storehouses and railroads.²⁰ Even in this instance, the association between total war and its capacity for creating complete desolation worked to demoralize those in Sherman's path; with their land and livelihoods in ashes, many of the region's residents were left with little. Efforts to eliminate financial support of the Confederate military by General Sherman heavily reflect Sheridan's strategy and tactics used to destroy the Shenandoah's ability to support the enemy.

Also reflecting the Shenandoah Campaign's total war precedent was the movement pattern Sherman used in his march to the coast. Both generals utilize a movement pattern that suggests a definite,

¹⁸ The Valley of the Shadow Project Digital Archive. <http://vshadow.vcdh.virginia.edu/>
A letter from General Ulysses S. Grant to General William T. Sherman written on March 16, 1865. Grant reports on his recent activities and remarks about General Sheridan's movements.

¹⁹ Lisa M. Brady. "The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War."
Environmental History Vol. 10, No. 3(2005): 433-441.

²⁰ Jones, Archer. *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* New York: The Free Press: A Division of Macmillian, Inc, 1992: 212. This source was cross referenced with Lisa M. Brady's article "The Wilderness of War," page 436 to ensure accuracy and consistency.



concerted objective (Figures 2 and 3). Although Sheridan had some physical obstacles limiting the extent of his campaign, the concentrated area it is able to encompass gives a sense of direction and

Figure 2.

The map details General Philip H. Sheridan's movements during his 1864 Shenandoah Campaign. His movements reflect a certain restriction due to geographic features (mountains, but are still concentrated enough to suggest a specific objective. **Source:** Map of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, 1864. <http://memory.loc.gov/>. Drawn by Robert Knox Sneden (1864-1865).

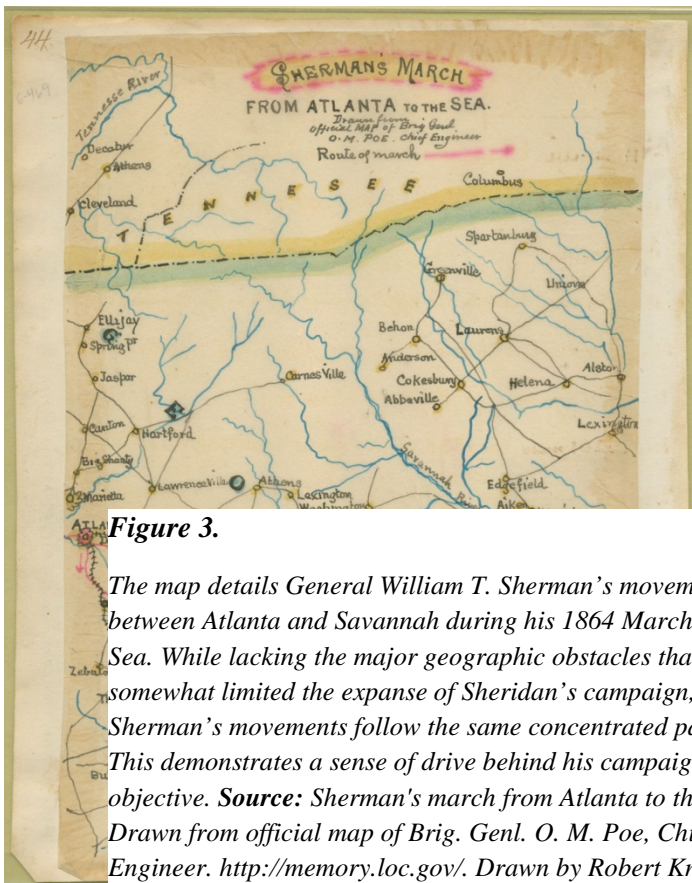


Figure 3.

The map details General William T. Sherman's movements between Atlanta and Savannah during his 1864 March to the Sea. While lacking the major geographic obstacles that somewhat limited the expanse of Sheridan's campaign, Sherman's movements follow the same concentrated pattern. This demonstrates a sense of drive behind his campaign objective. **Source:** Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea. Drawn from official map of Brig. Genl. O. M. Poe, Chief Engineer. <http://memory.loc.gov/>. Drawn by Robert Knox Sneden (1864-1865).

purpose to his movements; figure two displays certain parameters as to how far the campaign was allowed to spread laterally and demonstrates a sole focus on the immediate vicinity of the Shenandoah Valley. With a limited area of focus, Sheridan could ensure that his total war strategies and tactics would be used in their fullest capacity. Between Atlanta and Savannah in his March to the Sea, Sherman's pattern of travel closely reflects that of Sheridan's troops. Sherman's movements, however, follow major rail roads and involve the lands around them in his push to the sea. Again, Sherman's intentions and objectives are clear through his narrow sphere of focus on a specific route. Similarities between Sheridan's tactics and movements patterns and those of Sherman in his March to the Sea demonstrate the influence of the Shenandoah Campaign on total war maneuvers proceeding it.

General Sheridan's implementation of total war tactics during the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign had a far greater impact on the outcome of the Civil War than Sherman's March to the Sea as it fully developed and displayed the capabilities of the strategy. Taking hold of Grant's vision of a total warfare strategy, General Sheridan tested its ability to undermine the South during his campaign in the valley. Leaving an indelible impression on the American public and the evolution of total war, his actions demonstrated the extent to which the Union was willing to wage war to achieve its objective. The March to the Sea was the final product in the evolution of Grant's vision for a total war strategy.²¹ Through Sheridan's scorching of the Shenandoah Valley, Sherman was given a glimpse of what Grant's vision was capable of and was able to conceptualize his objective. By creating a psychological and military precedent that equated destruction with triumph, the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign under General Sheridan's directive would indirectly shape the outcome of the American Civil War; total war campaigns after Shenandoah would look to it as a demonstration of the raw potential in the strategy. "The Burning" of the Shenandoah Valley ushered in a new age of warfare for the United States.²²

²¹ Lisa M. Brady. "The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War." *Environmental History* Vol. 10, No. 3(2005): 435.

²² Joseph Wheelan. "The Burning: Phil Sheridan determined to show the Rebels a hot time in the Shenandoah Valley." *America's Civil War*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (2012):42.

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