

Other Union commanders prominent during the first half of the war shared many of McClellan's attitudes. In 1861 Rosecrans declined the position of Ohio's chief engineer because "I cannot stay at home . . . duty commands that I should offer my military acquirements to aid in diminishing the loss of life. I must go with our people to the front." Once there, he, like McClellan, stressed meticulous preparation, careful movement, and minimal bloodshed: "No prospect of brilliant victory shall induce me to depart from my intention of gaining success by maneuvering rather than by fighting. I will not throw these raw men of mine into the teeth of artillery and entrenchments if it is possible to avoid it." His Tullahoma campaign masterfully achieved his definition of victory. He outthought and outflanked Bragg, forcing the Confederates to fall back behind the Tennessee River. Though he pleaded with Washington—"I beg . . . that the War Department may not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood"—such victories were arid. They neither inflicted much loss of life on the enemy nor hastened the end of the war, nor did they offer demonstrations of courage.⁵¹

George Gordon Meade and particularly Gouverneur Warren also fitted comfortably within the dominant values. Warren was much less colorful than McClellan but equally solicitous of those under him. Lyman called him "certainly the most tender-hearted of our commanders." When he attempted to remain so rather than yield to the new rhythms of the war, the costs of the Wilderness battles nearly broke him: "For thirty days now, it has been one funeral procession, past me; and it is too much!"⁵² These were the generals who tried to fight their battles in accord with the precepts of courage. The war did not reward them.

Those who came to power in the Union Army during 1864 and 1865 were imbued far less with the war's initial commandments and in their essential orientation were destroyers rather than conservators. In his actions Ulysses Grant set the pattern, but he was far less contemplative and expressive than Sherman, so it is principally to the junior commander that one must look for the rationale informing their operations.

Neither general fitted easily within courage's constellation. Sherman acknowledged a belief in God, but one who bore little resemblance to the personal deity of others. Where McClellan

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attributed to God a benevolence offering earthly opportunity, Sherman seemed to find an ill-will constrictive of human actions. Where McClellan looked to God as the promise of the ultimate harmony of all interests, Sherman saw dissonance and a supernatural order that threatened to exploit one's weaknesses. God was to him the dispenser of fate; indeed, only in fate, which ruled life, did the will of God manifest itself. In an unusual and revealing passage, Sherman spoke in dark metaphor: "The antelope runs off as far as possible but fate brings him back. Again he dashes off in a new direction, but curiosity or his Fate lures him back, and again off he goes but the hunter knows he will return and bides his time. So have I made desperate efforts to escape my doom."⁵³ While others sought to align themselves with God's intentions, Sherman sought flight. Grant, whether being more reticent or having less to reveal, scarcely mentioned religious interests or concerns.

Their views of courage were no more orthodox. Neither thought of himself as an embodiment of courage or attempted to exemplify it for others. Neither was inclined to the heroic gesture; their Civil War records contained none of the individual acts of bravery by which other generals gained the admiration of their men. They were, moreover, much less solicitous of their soldiers than were McClellan and those of his school.

Sherman, who frequently pitched his reflections at the level of social analysis, was obsessed with the problem of discipline. He thought of his soldiers as refractory individualists, of his army as a mob, of society as nearly anarchic, of democracy as a source of severe social weakness. Holding such conceptions, he reacted with minimal emotion to the sights of the battlefield. At First Bull Run, "for the first time I saw the carnage of battle, men lying in every conceivable shape, and mangled in a horrible way; but this did not make a particle of impression on me." What did strike him were the "horses running about riderless with blood streaming from their nostrils, lying on the ground hitched to guns, gnawing their sides in death." At Shiloh he saw scenes "that would have cured anybody of war," but he remained well insulated by his conviction that such sights were intrinsic to war and that the "very object of war is to produce results by death and slaughter," a commonplace today, but not in 1861. He insisted that he felt sympathy for the dead and wounded but, he added, had no time for them.⁵⁴

Ulysses Grant too remained aloof from his men. He was not unfeeling. In 1848 he had attended a Mexican bullfight and had found it "sickening." "I could not see how human beings could enjoy the sufferings of beasts, and often of men, as they seemed to do on these occasions." In the wake of Admiral David Porter's unsuccessful attempt to silence Confederate guns at Grand Gulf, Grant boarded his flagship, which had been struck by an enemy shell. "The sight of the mangled and dying men which met my eye . . . was sickening." Of Champion's Hill he wrote, "While a battle is raging one can see his enemy mowed down by the thousand, or the ten thousand, with great composure; but after the battle these scenes are distressing, and one is naturally disposed to do as much to alleviate the suffering of an enemy as a friend." But Grant's sensitivity seemed to dull as the scale of losses increased. Of Shiloh he wrote,

I saw an open field . . . over which the Confederates had made repeated charges . . . so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing in any direction, stepping on dead bodies, without a foot touching the ground. On our side National and Confederate troops were mingled together in about equal proportions; but on the remainder of the field nearly all were Confederates. On one part, which had evidently not been ploughed for several years, probably because the land was poor, bushes had grown up, some to the height of eight or ten feet. There was not one of those left standing unpierced by bullets. The smaller ones were all cut down.

Those observations appear to have been employed casually to illustrate Grant's contention that "Shiloh was the severest battle fought at the West during the war." He said of his disastrous charges at Cold Harbor, "This assault cost us heavily and probably without benefit to compensate; but the enemy was not deterred by the occurrence sufficiently to induce him to take the offensive." Ultimately, both Grant and Sherman reduced their concern for combat losses to negligible levels. Grant had become convinced that victory would come to the side "which never counted its dead." During the Atlanta campaign Sherman casually recognized that "I begin to regard the death and mangling of a couple of thousand men as a small affair, a kind of morning

Enlisted men recognized the detachment in both generals.

Wilkeson was struck by Grant's impassivity as the commander watched one of his attacking ranks "smashed . . . to flinders." "He sat impassive and smoked steadily, and watched the short-lived battle and decided defeat without displaying emotion." In contrast to the cheers and salutes that greeted McClellan's approach, rank-and-file demonstrations of enthusiasm for Grant's leadership were rare. Seldom did troops offer him the gestures of affection to which Lee, Jackson, and McClellan had become accustomed. Nor did Sherman become, until well after the war, the "Uncle Billy" whose congeniality won over his veterans. In both generals, soldiers discerned the resolve of destroyers whose efforts to annihilate the enemy were likely to require the annihilation of many of them.⁵⁶

It is impossible to identify precisely the influences that propelled those Union military leaders, all West Pointers, to one stance or to the other, but the patterns of their prewar activity are suggestive. All of the conservators had enjoyed important measures of success. In 1860 McClellan was the president of the eastern division of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad, at the impressive annual salary of \$10,000. Rosecrans, although his business had almost foundered in the 1850s, soon made a profitable venture of his Cincinnati coal-oil plant. Warren, an 1850 West Point honors graduate welcomed into the Engineers' elite, became a topographical engineer-explorer whose work won him a reputation as one of the best of the army's young officers.⁵⁷

In sharp contrast stood Ulysses Grant, almost all of whose 1850s projects in investment, farming, and merchandising buckled in failure. Sherman too knew severe disappointment: lagging promotions; the "dull, tame life" of a commissary captain; and exhausting efforts in banking and finance until the crash of 1857 brought painful indebtedness and the closure of his New York City firm. ("Of all lives on earth," he said, "a banker's is the worst, and no wonder they are specially debarred all chances of heaven.") Sherman's near-bankruptcy and subsequent missteps in law and farming spun him to the edge of nervous collapse. His pessimism was profound, and the imagery in which he portrayed himself stark. "I feel mistrust of everybody and everything." "I look upon myself as a dead cock in the pit, not worthy of further notice." Finally, he sought refuge as superintendent of an insignificant Louisiana military college. Philip Sheridan had been unhappy at West Point. Deficiencies in his

social and academic performance had carried him close to expulsion, and his record as a garrison soldier during the 1850s was little better.⁵⁸

Those divergences in accomplishment were important not because they revealed contrasting temperaments or abilities—that was unclear—but because they grew to express themselves in antithetical convictions regarding the efficacy of the individual. The conservator generals entered the Civil War as optimists. They felt great personal empowerment. They viewed combat primarily as a setting for demonstrations of courage and their own military proficiency—within God's Plan of course, but not much restricted thereby. As McClellan said, God was "not wont to aid those who refuse to aid themselves." They comprehended war exclusively as the sum of their own and others' efforts. In short, war was to be what they made of it in their performances upon combat's stage.

Conversely, failure appears to have placed those who were to become the destroyer generals on or beyond the peripheries of many of the conservators' initial precepts. Neither Grant nor Sherman felt any confidence that the individual could master his fate. Thomas Hamer, a man Grant so admired that he expected him to become President, had volunteered for the Mexican War, sickened, and died. Grant decided that had Hamer lived, he would have appointed Grant to a staff position, a favor removing Grant from any possibility of the fame he would achieve. Grant cited the matter "to show how little men control their own destiny." Practically alone in prewar days, Sherman accorded war a separate identity, an intrinsic nature not dependent on its participants' actions. Discussing with a Louisiana friend the approach of war, he had said, "This country will be drenched in blood. . . . You people speak so lightly of war. You don't know what you are talking about. War is a terrible thing. . . . months of marching, exposure and suffering . . . a frightful loss of life and property . . . the demoralization of the people." War was not, as others thought, a test of or contest between values; war was power. He later said that "war, like the thunderbolt, follows its laws and turns not aside even if the beautiful, the virtuous and charitable stand in its path." War was "dark and cruel," a struggle between stronger and weaker.⁵⁹ Thus from the outset Sherman held a conception of war as bloody conflict that would inevitably gain a momentum beyond the energy imparted to it

by its participants and ultimately an independence of its participants. Here he employed an imagery that would come into general use only during the Great War, one of war as implacable and indifferent, as commanding a nature and a power of its own. Though it left no room for heroic conceptions, Sherman was not repulsed by his vision.

In other ways, too, Grant and Sherman had drifted from conventional values. Grant's *Memoirs* made clear how far he had moved from traditional understandings of courage. Indeed, he turned on their heads actions others deemed courageous and insisted that his own performance of them proved that he was deficient in courage. He believed both that he lacked "the courage to fight a duel" and that most duels were fought "for want of moral courage on the part of those engaged to decline" challenges. He told of journeys he pushed forward, among wolves that frightened him, because he lacked the courage to turn back. He recounted charges he joined and battles into which he thrust his men because he lacked the courage to halt and reconsider—"so I kept right on." That appeared to be, appropriately, a formula for certain failure. If Grant acted in ways others applauded, he told himself he did so only from personal defect; if he did not so act, he would appear cowardly in others' eyes.⁶⁰

One of the peculiar results of Grant's inurement to failure was that it diminished his investment in the system of values others brought to the Civil War and thus provided a detachment making visible and reasonable possibilities hidden or unthinkable to others. When, for example, he confessed his fear, he made no effort to conquer it but simply moved beyond it by concluding that his opponents were just as fearful as he. Expecting far less glory of the war, he was open much sooner to its reality, to "seeing things as they actually were," as Matthew Arnold said of him.⁶¹ Only such a man would have set soldiers laboring on Vicksburg approaches in which he had no confidence, because he thought it better that they work than sit idle and sicken. Only Grant would have sent his soldiers into an attack he thought futile, because he calculated that, if not allowed to try the charge, they would grow impatient in the siege trenches.

In one of his Civil War stories, Harold Frederic described the realization that came in 1864 to those in upstate New York: "A new General was at the head of affairs, and he was going in, with jaws set and nerves of steel, to smash, kill, burn, annihilate,

sparing nothing, looking neither right or left, till the red road had been hewed through to Richmond." Ulysses Grant was that general.⁶²

As experience upended assumptions about the nature of war, Sherman too seemed to draw power from the sense of powerlessness conveyed by his civilian failures. "Generally," he said, "war is destruction and nothing else." "War is cruelty and you cannot refine it." "You might as well appeal against the thunderstorm as against these terrible hardships of war." Accordingly, against such a force, one no more subject to man's control than natural phenomena, individuals were powerless save to conform. "I have made war vindictively; war is war, and you can make nothing else of it." But that was simply a logician's sleight-of-hand. By subordinating himself, by presenting himself merely as war's agent, Sherman freed himself to wage war in just those ways that made it what he said it was. Sherman said war was hell, and the last years of the Civil War were hellish because he and others made them so.⁶³

Sherman cited war's invariable nature, used force that made a shambles of earlier moral restraints (some of which he had espoused), and pleaded his impotence to do otherwise. "Our soldiers," he complained, "are the most destructive men I have ever known," overlooking that his war made it appropriate that they destroy to the utmost. During his advance through South Carolina, he reported that he could do nothing to restrain his army; he forgot his orders to "forage liberally" and his decree of "devastation more or less relentless" if opposition appeared, a condition that, given his description of war's nature, was the flimsiest of deterrents. "Men go to war to kill or to get killed," he said, "and should expect no tenderness"—nor would his war require that they show any. "God help the starving families! I warned them . . . against this . . . visitation and it is at hand," he said, as if he had seen war approaching as a flood, had sounded the alarm—and had no hand on the floodgates. Sherman derived additional justification from a sense of himself as a teacher, instructing others in the nature of war. He wrote of his North Carolina campaign: "Thousands of people may perish, but they now realise that war means something else than vain glory and boasting." Satisfaction, even pride, seemed to resound through his words, "I have taught people what war is."⁶⁴

Sherman had provided a powerful rationale for a warfare of

terror: that frightfulness was the true essence of war and that soldiers had no choice but to align their actions with it. Several corollaries were necessary, however, to broaden the definition of the enemy and to reassure a Northern population that still pictured war differently. Prior to Vicksburg, Sherman had argued in favor of confining warfare to combatants, though more on grounds of discipline than of humanitarian concern: "War at best is barbarism, but to involve all—children, women, old and helpless—is more than can be justified. Our men will become absolutely lawless unless they can be checked." Nevertheless, in defense of his decision to remove Atlanta's remaining civilian population, he did not hesitate to enlarge his definition of the opposition: "[W]ar is war, and not popularity-seeking. If [Atlantans] want peace, they and their relatives must stop the war."⁶⁵

Philip Sheridan made one attempt to return civilians to the spectator's role he thought proper. He calculated that terror directed at the residents of Mosby's Confederacy would force them to separate themselves from partisan activity. If I ravage, he appears to have reasoned, the local people will come to hate the guerrillas whose presence brings me among them. Under Sheridan's harsh pressure, Middleburg citizens did ask Mosby to halt his attacks (probably more to pacify Sheridan than to influence Mosby), but Mosby's refusal brought no weakening of his local support. Sheridan's experiment failed.⁶⁶

More rigid than Sheridan, Sherman had already pushed on to declare that all in the South were irrevocable enemies: "[T]he entire South, man, woman and child, is against us, armed and determined." As enemies, the civilians of the Confederacy risked more than they realized: "A people who will persevere in war beyond a certain limit ought to know the consequence. Many, many people with less pertinacity have been wiped out of national existence." By 1864, that elaboration of the enemy had become a necessity, for it alone could provide justification for the immense destruction of homes, farms, and goods.⁶⁷

Other corollaries proposed that Southerners, civilians and soldiers, were solely responsible for the terror visited on them and, paradoxically, that what befell them was to their ultimate benefit. Again, the reasoning—premised on the enlarged enemy—was relentlessly expansive. If Confederate forces cut Union lines of supply and communication, it was their fault that Union soldiers took everything they found. (And if Federals did not take

all they found, what they left behind would surely be used against them.) If Southern farmers burned their forage to deny it to Northern forces, it was their fault that their houses were burned. If Southerners corresponded with those in arms against the North, they were spies. Ultimately, Sherman decided that the costs of the war were "not chargeable to us, but to those who made the war." The rebels "had forced us into war, and . . . deserved all they got and *more*." Those who started the war, whether they were soldiers, residents of an area of guerrilla activity, or simply Southerners at large, must bear its "natural consequences."⁶⁸

Here was an invitation to a warfare of terror both expansive and increasingly casual. When a telegraph wire was cut and shots were fired at a train, John Beatty took civilian hostages and burned the town of Paint Rock, Alabama. He explained that such action was "the true policy, and the only one that will preserve us from constant *annoyance*." Veterans would tell of Sherman's ordering a long flanking movement and instructing a subordinate how to report his progress: "See here, Cox, burn a few barns occasionally, as you go along. I can't understand those signal flags, but I know what smoke means."⁶⁹

A final corollary held that such tactics would yield ultimate benefits to both Northerners and Southerners, almost a kindness to the latter. Terror was the fastest road to peace. Sherman argued that "the crueler [war] is, the sooner it will be over." In defense of his destruction of the crops of Loudon County, Sheridan contended that death "is popularly considered the maximum of punishment in war, but it is not; reduction to poverty brings prayers for peace more surely and more quickly than does the destruction of human life." Grant looked upon war as "an aching tooth that cannot be mended. To save greater prolonged suffering, one must bear the more acute but shorter pain of removal. In war the toll of prolonged inactivity is greater than the toll of battle. To conserve life, in war, is to fight unceasingly." Sherman agreed that true mercy lay in hastening the end and in ensuring that the war was made so terrible that the peace would endure. Such was the logic that led him to announce in March 1864, as he prepared for the Atlanta campaign—and Grant for the Wilderness—that "all that has gone before is mere skirmishing. The war now begins."⁷⁰

Union soldiers carried by war's currents from foraging (we need what they have, the reasoning went) to looting (we want

what they have; we ought to deprive them of what they have) to destruction (we must punish them by destroying what they have) welcomed such comprehensive and lofty rationales as Sherman's.

Some, like Corydon Foote of the 10th Michigan, who had stolen a plantation family's silver during the march to the sea, wondered perplexedly, "Why does a fellow do things against his own nature?" A few rejected outright the thrust of the war. Sherman's methods horrified Carl Schurz, who found their nearest equivalent in the French destruction of the Palatinate during the seventeenth century and worried that the Union Army would reduce itself to a "band of robbers." Others reacted to particular experiences in ways setting them apart from what was happening around them. The sacking and burning of Darien, Georgia, dismayed Robert Gould Shaw: "I have gone through the war without dishonor, and I do not like to degenerate into a plunderer and a robber. . . . After going through hard campaigning and hard fighting in Virginia, this [wanton destruction] makes me very much ashamed of myself." Rutherford Hayes was so deeply affected by the destruction Banks inflicted on Lynchburg that he emerged, his biographer concluded, "the new and more humane Hayes." He warned his wife against being misled by such catch phrases as "brutal rebels," for "we have brutal officers and men too."⁷¹

Still, by 1864 most soldiers were inextricably bound to the dynamic of the war and echoed almost all aspects of Sherman's position. Watching Atlanta burn, Michael Fitch agreed that war "is made up of cruelty and destruction." Robert Burdette of the 47th Illinois saw inevitability in the demolition of Southern homes, fences, and railroads: "That's war. Destruction of innocent and useful things. Destruction of everything." Charles Francis Adams's encounter with a Virginia civilian made clear that he too had enlarged his definition of the enemy. Explaining to an "old secesh farmer" why he was taking the last of his corn, Adams told him that "Virginia had brought this on herself and need expect no mercy." Like Sherman, the Illinois officer James Connolly promised to bring down an apocalypse premised on a wildly exaggerated threat of civilian resistance to Federal soldiers: "Everything must be destroyed . . . all considerations of mercy and humanity must bow before the inexorable demands of self-preservation." Charles Lynch of the 18th Connecticut was

another who promoted himself from a fighter to an observer of the conflict and thus placed himself above the responsibility of the participant: "I am often reminded that death and destruction follow the path of war." When Alabama farm people, vowing that they were Unionists, begged Federal soldiers not to take their chickens, John Brobst explained in a letter home why the 25th Wisconsin had paid no heed: "But we have no respect of persons down here. They must all suffer alike." Later he wrote home from Georgia: "[T]hat is the way that we carry on the war now, raze, burn, and destroy everything we come to."⁷²

That mode of warfare reached its culmination in the march of Sherman's army through South Carolina. For the first of the secession states, Sherman said, his men prepared "the scourge of the war in its worst form"; "the whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South Carolina." Alpheus Williams reported that his men, "impressed with the idea that every South Carolinian was an arrant Rebel, spared nothing but the old men, women, and children. All materials, all vacant houses, factories, cotton-gins and presses, everything that makes the wealth of a people, was swept away. The soldiers quietly took the matter into their own hands"—with the result "a blackened swath seventy miles wide."⁷³

As Sherman's regiments approached Columbia, a Confederate artillery battery appeared and began firing at the Federals. Sherman was angry, for he was sure that his opponents, Beauregard and Hampton, knew that a few shells would have no impact on the military outcome, that they could not prevent Union entry into the city. Amid the smoke of destruction, amid the swirl of pillage, robbery, and violence to which the conflict had come, Sherman invoked with no sign of irony one of the earliest and most preservative precepts of courage's war. To send over those shells, he complained, was "wanton mischief" and an "unnecessary act of war."⁷⁴