

Total War on the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia

Uncovering the Truth about the Un-Civil War

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By Mike Scruggs

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Winchester, VA Confederate Monument
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On June 27, 1863, near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania--just days before the momentous Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate General Robert E. Lee issued a general order to the Army of Northern Virginia, praising them for their honorable conduct thus far in their march into Union territory, but cautioning them on their continuing responsibility to respect all private property and the lives of all noncombatants.

“The commanding general considers no greater disgrace could befall the army, and through it our whole people, than the perpetration of the barbarous outrages upon the unarmed and defenseless and the wanton destruction of private property, that have marked the course of the enemy in our own country...It must be remembered that we make war only upon armed men, and that we cannot take vengeance for the wrongs our people have suffered...without offending against Him to whom vengeance belongeth, without whose favor and support our efforts must all prove in vain.”

With few exceptions, the Confederate armies managed to conduct themselves honorably during the war. One of the major exceptions, however, was at Chambersburg a little more than a year after the Battle of Gettysburg. On August 30, 1864, Confederate Brigadier General John McCausland tried to exact a tribute in cash or gold from the city of Chambersburg as payment in retaliation for Union General David Hunter's burning crops and homes in the southern part of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and shelling the ungarrisoned and unprotected town of Lexington in the previous two months. When the town officials refused, he evacuated the 3,000 inhabitants and then set the downtown business district on fire, which resulted in about half the town being destroyed. This was unbeknown to General Lee. According to Jubal Early, McCausland's immediate superior, McCausland had gone beyond the scope of his orders. Even so, this action was taken to deter further depredation of Virginia towns and farms by Hunter, and considerable precaution was taken to prevent civilian casualties.

Misconduct occurred on both sides, but with a significant difference. Southern misconduct was infrequent and not sanctioned by high levels of Confederate leadership. It usually resulted in discipline. Six Confederate soldiers were shot for plundering during the Gettysburg campaign in 1863. Union misconduct was frequent and--especially in the last two years of the war--was employed as part of a systematic policy of devastation to break the will of the Southern people by starvation and terror.

There were notable exceptions to this, Union generals George B. McClellan and Don Carlos Buell, being among the most prominent. But these generals were unable to prevail against the Total War thinking of Lincoln, Secretary of War Stanton, and the Radical Republicans in Congress. Many lower-ranking Union officers were heart-sick at having to carry out orders to torch the homes of women and children. Among these was General Lawrence Chamberlain, hero of Little Round Top at Gettysburg, and Col. Robert G. Shaw, commander of the 54th Massachusetts, depicted in the movie, *Glory*. Chamberlain wrote to his sister during the Petersburg campaign, late in the war: “I

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am willing to fight men in arms, but not babes in arms.”

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The highest level of Union military leadership would fall into the hands of those generals willing and sometimes eager to practice the devastation and inhumanity of Total War.

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In September 1864, General Grant sent General Philip Sheridan with 40,000 men to reinforce Hunter's 22,000 men and severely punish the much smaller forces of Jubal Early and Wade Hampton. But their primary purpose was to destroy the entire Shenandoah Valley. Up to that point, with the exception of ruthless Union military suppression of Southern partisans and sympathizers in Missouri, the Union's Total War policy had been on a relatively small scale, but now it would be practiced on a grand scale.

Union troops under the command of Sheridan and Hunter devastated a 92 mile strip of the Shenandoah Valley from Winchester to Staunton, in some places 40 miles wide. This had been the breadbasket of the Confederate Army and the Southern people. The remaining railroads were destroyed. Crops of all kinds were burned. Homes were looted and burned. The Federal troops destroyed more than 2,000 barns and all the farm equipment in them. A destroyed barn was a destroyed livelihood for farm families. They destroyed seventy mills, 4,000 horses, 11,000 cattle, 12,000 sheep, and other livestock. Anything the Union troops could not use themselves, they destroyed. Even pump handles were destroyed so families could not draw water from their wells.

One of Jubal Early's staff officers wrote of this tragic and appalling scene:

“I rode down the Valley after Sheridan's retreating cavalry beneath great columns of smoke...I saw mothers and maidens tearing their hair and shrieking to Heaven in their fright and despair, and little children, voiceless and tearless in their pitiable terror.”

Sheridan had made good on Grant's order **“to eat out Virginia clear and clean.”** As Grant had suggested, **“a crow flying over the Shenandoah Valley would have to carry its own lunch.”** One might ask what sort of a “Union” practices such deliberate barbarity on those it claims should be partners in the “Union.” What sort of thinking allows such inhumanity in the name of “Saving the Union”? It is the twisted thinking of secular humanism with its sanctimonious and totalitarian pragmatism. It is the moral perversion that insists that the means justifies the end. It is the contorted philosophy that might makes right.

General Sherman, perhaps the grand champion of Total War, said in January of 1864:

“The government of the U. S. has any and all rights which they choose to enforce in war—to take their lives, their homes, their land, their everything--war is simply unrestrained by the Constitution...to the persistent secessionist, why death is mercy, and the quicker he or she is disposed of the better.”

Sherman and Sheridan would both attain the position of Commanding General of the U. S. Army in

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later years. Both are credited with the famous saying that “**the only good Indian is a dead Indian**.” Sherman elaborated his Total War philosophy with these words:
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“The more Indians we can kill this year the fewer we will need to kill the next, because the more we see of the Indians the more convinced I become that they must either be killed or be maintained as a species of pauper. Their attempts at civilization are ridiculous.”

Some people sympathize with Sherman’s famous words that cruelty makes wars shorter, and since shortening a war will bring peace sooner, cruelty in war is justified. But this is a corrupting and convoluted doctrine that would justify anything in the pursuit of victory. Just warfare must be proportionate in its response to enemy action and threats. An appropriate level of force to bring a quick peace would be justified. But deliberate cruelty, especially that targeting noncombatants, prisoners of war, and wounded can never be justified. Wanton destruction of the food supplies and shelter of noncombatant civilians is neither justified nor honorable. It only multiplies violence and future grievances and morally corrupts those who succumb to such a brutal philosophy. One thing Sherman said is more agreeable to sensible people:

“War is at best barbarism. Its glory is all moonshine...War is hell.”

The devastation of the Shenandoah Valley, so appalling in its grand scale of Total Warfare, would pale in comparison with Sherman’s operations in Georgia and South Carolina in late 1864 and early 1865.

Truth is the mother of virtue. Together they are first principles of duty, honor, and patriotism.