

C Class War

By Victor Davis Hanson

How the Civil War squashed aristocracy in America



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General William Tecumseh Sherman—a quirky, difficult, and much misunderstood man—deserves a place on the roll call of great liberators in human history. More than any other person, he destroyed the institution of American slavery and the Southern aristocracy that was interwoven with it. In the late fall of 1864 he marched an army of over 60,000 rural, voting Americans—mostly farmers from the Midwest—into the heart of the Confederacy, a patrician society based on bound labor. Sherman's agrarian citizen-soldiers upended that world of slaves and masters, instantly liberated tens of thousands, and helped therein to destroy forever

the idea of privileged nobility in America. In a 300-mile march covering less than 40 days these armed men changed the entire psychological and material course of our national history.

Make no mistake about it—Sherman waged total war. After taking and burning the city of Atlanta, he set off across the heart of Georgia on his way to the Atlantic coast. Moving without an unwieldy supply chain, his men lived off the land. Earlier Northern battlefield successes had neither destroyed Southern morale nor dented the Confederacy's ability to field new armies. Union

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forces had gotten to within a few miles of the Confederate capital in Richmond yet the South had not sued for peace and did not, in fact, feel it was beaten.

This army, however, was aimed at the heartland of the Southern aristocrats—their land and slaves—and left them impotent and discredited before their helpless women and children. Facing little opposition once they left Atlanta, Sherman's men destroyed the very infrastructure that supported slavery and upheld the slaveholding elites—plantations, communications, factories, and government facilities. Southern military officers put great capital in the idea of the sanctity of the Southern homeland. They deemed themselves great raiders and marauders, who harassed fixed garrisons and terrorized timid populations. Sherman, however, gave the Confederacy the raid of its life. The central objective could be summed up quite simply: Freeing the unfree and humiliating the arrogant.

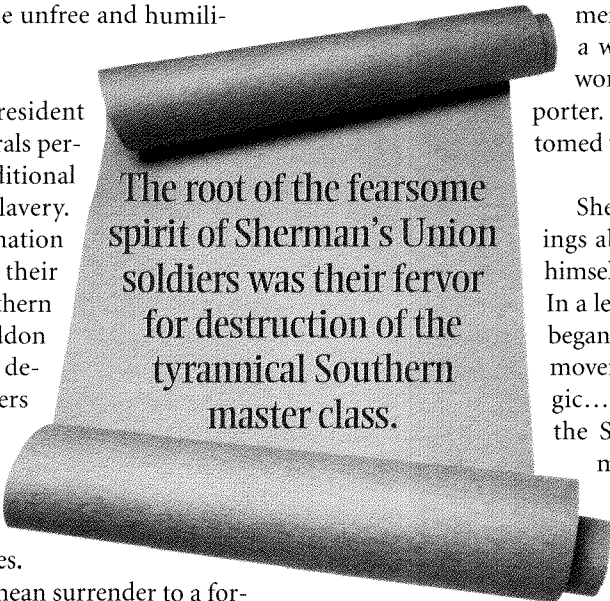
As the war dragged on, President Lincoln and his Union generals persisted in the idea of unconditional surrender and with it the end of slavery. Facing the specter of an egalitarian nation where race and class would lose their power to command, recalcitrant Southern elites dug in deeper for their Armageddon of 1864. There was no tomorrow in defeat, so the entry of Northern invaders created an understandable panic over the end to an entire way of a century-old existence. Many Southerners lived far removed from the mainstream of North American mores. Defeat, the planters believed, would mean surrender to a foreign culture antithetical to their existing hierarchies. It would wash away status gained at birth, and allow neutral, heartless markets to govern the opportunity of all citizens. Success and status would be found solely in profit, not in inherited reputation. An all-powerful and distant federal government, not local oligarchic councils, would to a far greater degree dictate how money was raised and spent.

Sherman's men delivered much of what the South feared: not only because they were ordered to, but because gradually they became driven, by an ideological furor, to destroy the nature of Southern aristocracy. At the outset, the Midwesterners Sherman led really knew almost nothing about slavery or slaves. Indeed, most Northerners had never seen a Negro or a plantation; many were, in the abstract, racists. But once Sherman's men observed the conditions in which slaves were kept unfree, and the ideology and venom of the so-called master class, there arose among these small farmers from the mid-American frontier a powerful repulsion. Very quickly, Sherman's young troops came to abhor the rich Georgians they overran. A soldier from Illinois was only too happy to burn Atlanta; it "and every other Southern city deserve nothing better than general destruction," he wrote, for "buying and selling" other human beings.

Enlisted men talked agitatedly of the exploitation they saw,

and their officers nodded in agreement. Given that almost all the regimental commanders of Sherman's forces had been promoted from within the army, and that almost 50 percent of the army's captains and 90 percent of its lieutenants had also served as enlisted men, there was an unmatched familiarity between officer and soldier—and thus a deep populism embedded in the ranks. A Southern witness in the Carolinas wrote of the unanimity of spirit and cause within Sherman's army:

The officers and men are on terms of perfect equality socially. Off duty they drink together, go arm in arm about the town, call each other by the first name, in a way that startles.... A friend heard a private familiarly addressing a Brigadier General as "Jake." Miss Lee saw another General taking hold with his men to help move a lot of barrels on a wharf. He took off his coat and worked three hours, like a common porter. This seems strange to us, accustomed to the aristocratic system.



The root of the fearsome spirit of Sherman's Union soldiers was their fervor for destruction of the tyrannical Southern master class.

Sherman—despite his occasional railings about the dangers of the mob—was himself a man of strong populist impulses. In a letter to Washington shortly before he began his march, Sherman wrote that "this movement is not purely military or strategic...it will illustrate the vulnerability of the South. They don't know what war means, but when the rich planters of Oconee and Savannah see their fences and corn and hogs and sheep vanish before their eyes they will have something more than a mean opinion of the 'Yanks.'"

It cannot be emphasized enough that the society Sherman's men found was the polar opposite of the rural Western towns from which they came. True, the slave owners so over-represented among the South's military and political leaders were not truly characteristic of Southern society. For example, there may have been only 10,000 or so really large slaveholders in the South. About 75 percent of the South's white population had never had any connection with African chattels at all. Only 385,000 out of some 6 million citizens who lived in the Confederacy or border areas sympathetic to the South were themselves currently slave owners. Nevertheless, morally, economically, ideologically, and culturally, slavery and the aristocratic culture it built were at the center of Southern life, and accepted and supported by most Southerners, especially in the face of Northern criticism.

When Sherman and his soldiers reached Savannah, the symbols of class hierarchy disgusted most of the Northerners. There was, for instance, the "Patrician Church" that reserved middle and front seats for the well-born. "All other persons are invited as cordially to attend and occupy the remaining seats." When Northerner Henry Hitchcock spied Wade Hampton, the millionaire slave-owning Confederate general, at the final armistice between Sherman and Confederate comman-

der Joe Johnson he exemplified the loathing Sherman's men felt for the plantationists:

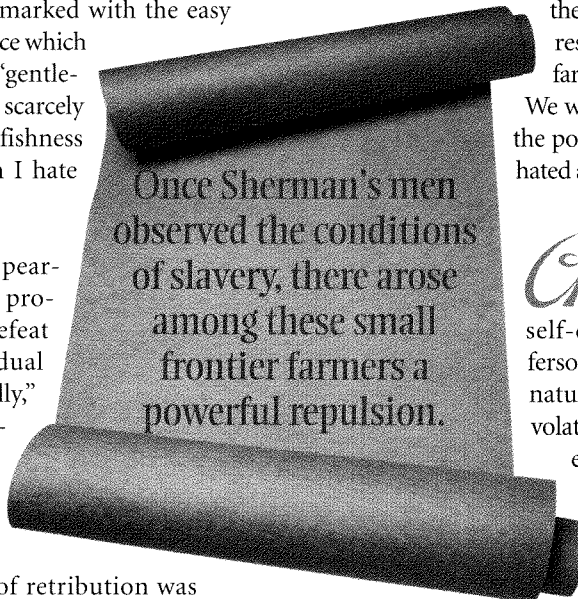
Hampton's whole demeanor was marked with the easy 'well-bred' essentially vulgar insolence which is characteristic of *that* type of "gentleman"; a man of polished manners, scarcely veiling the arrogance and utter selfishness which marks his class, and which I hate with a perfect hatred.

Sherman's march took on the appearance of an ideological crusade that professed that collective Confederate defeat must be synonymous with individual ruin. Like their 44-year-old "Uncle Billy," the rank and file recruits were convinced that they were in a total war with haughty purveyors of real evil. Sherman's fiery rhetoric and personality had now permeated the entire army. The troops' simmering spirit of retribution was present when the advance guard of Sherman's army rode into Madison, Georgia, in a heavy rain during the morning of November 20, 1864. The town was in the richest part of the state, inhabited by the Confederacy's most successful planters and merchants. Rice Bull of the Union army described Madison as the most beautiful town on the entire march: "The many fine residences were built in the same manner of all the better class of Southern homes, extensive piazzas in front with tall fluted columns reaching almost to the top of the house."

Upon arrival, General Henry Slocum's men quickly looted the

stores, burned the courthouse, and torched several of the "better class of Southern homes." Then they demolished the slave pens. Rice

Bull editorialized: "We felt that the people of these seemingly prosperous cities were more responsible for the war than those whose farms we had overrun since leaving Atlanta. We wanted to impress on them some idea of the power and magnitude of the Army they so hated and despised."



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Among the Southern elite, the system of great cotton plantations based on involuntary labor was self-characterized as a sort of noble Jeffersonian agrarianism. It was passed off as a natural path to creating wealth without the volatility and exploitation of free men inherent in Northern industrial capitalism, or the precarious hardship of Western homesteading. How, other than through the use of ignorant slaves, could Americans farm the vast estates so essential in providing rice, tobacco,

and cotton to the republic? These were crops, the Confederate sophistry went, that were grown in the muggy, tropical climate of the Deep South, where the African Negro was naturally at home and could be protected by Christian slave masters.

The pragmatic Sherman scoffed at these paternalistic rationalizations. He demonstrated how much he thought cotton was really worth to the United States when one head of local Confederate forces in South Carolina offered to cease burning cotton if Sherman's men would in turn stop torching estates. Sherman replied: "I

Let Us Die To Make Men Free

By Harvey Rollins and Karina Rollins

The soldiers of the Union army, one bit of conventional wisdom has it, fought strictly to preserve the Union, and were unconcerned with freeing the slaves. A dismayingly large number of people have accepted the fiction that America's ferocious Civil War was fought not over human liberty, but over "states' rights." The rights in question, of course, were to own human beings as property.

So what was the average Union soldier, ready to sacrifice his life in battle, fighting for? One obvious test is to look at what the soldiers did to boost their morale in the wretched moments of wartime. Throughout history, soldiers have sung motivational songs to sustain their spirits,

and so it was in the Civil War. The most popular song of the Army of the Potomac throughout the war was "John Brown's Body," an unrefined but fervent tribute to the radical abolitionist who was hanged for his attack on Harper's Ferry. "John Brown died that the slave might be free/But his soul is marching on!" the soldiers shouted out. "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" went the exhilarating chorus.

In 1861, the first year of the war, Julia Ward Howe, wife of Northern abolitionist and journalist S. G. Howe, made her first trip to the nation's capital. While returning from a military review, she observed a procession of soldiers singing the John Brown song. Her friend, the Reverend James Freeman Clarke, suggested she write better words for the tune. Her result,

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic" was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862.

Howe kept the rousing "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" but transformed the anti-slavery message from John Brown's mission to a mission of God: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," she begins. She ends with, "In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea/With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me/As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free/While God is marching on." President Lincoln, upon first hearing the song performed in 1863, had only three words: "Sing it again." It soon became the unofficial anthem of the North. The Union troops, for their part, continued to sing the less poetic but even more explicitly anti-slavery