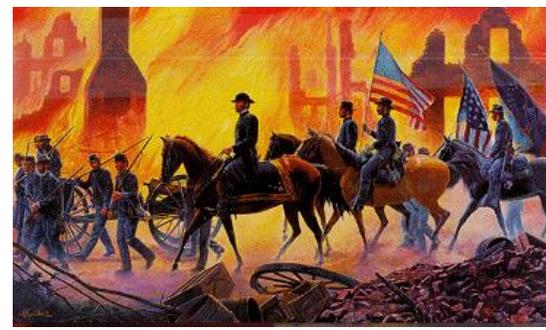


Wiping the South Out of National Existence

Headquarters,
Department of Tennessee,
January 1, 1863,
Major R. M. Sawyer,
AAG Army of Tennessee, Huntsville:



"Dear Sawyer---In my former letter I have answered all your questions save one, and that relates to the treatment of inhabitants known, or suspected to be, hostile or "secesh." The war which prevails in our land is essentially a war of races. The Southern people entered into a clear compact of government, but still maintained a species of separate interests, history and prejudices. These latter became stronger and stronger, till they have led to war, which has developed the fruits of the bitterest kind. We of the North are, beyond all question, right in our lawful cause . . . Now, the question arises, should we treat as absolute enemies all in the South who differ with us in opinions or prejudices -- [and] kill or banish them? Or should we give them time to think and gradually change their conduct so as to conform to the new order of things which is slowly and gradually creeping into their country?

When men take arms to resist our rightful authority, we are compelled to use force because all reason and argument ceases when arms are resorted to. If the people, or any of them, keep up a correspondence with parties in hostility, they are spies, and can be punished with death or minor punishment. These are well established principles of war, and the people of the South having appealed to war, are barred from appealing to our Constitution, which they have practically and publicly defied. They have appealed to war and must abide its rules and laws.

The United States, as a belligerent party claiming right in the soil as the ultimate sovereign, have a right to change the population, and it may be and it, both politic and best, that we should do so in certain districts. When the inhabitants persist too long in hostility, it may be both politic and right that we should banish them and appropriate their lands to a more loyal and useful population. No man would deny that the United States would be benefited by dispossessing a single prejudiced, hard-headed and disloyal planter and substitute in his place a dozen or more patient, industrious, good families, even if they be of foreign birth. It is all idle nonsense for these Southern planters to say that they made the South, that they own it, and that they can do as they please---even to break up our government, and to shut up the natural avenues of trade, intercourse and commerce.

We know, and they know if they are intelligent beings, that, as compared with the whole world they are but as five millions are to one thousand millions -- that they did not create the land -- that their only title to its use and enjoyment is the deed of the United States, and if they appeal to war they hold their all by a very insecure tenure. For my part, I believe that this war is the result of false political doctrine, for which we are all as a people responsible, viz: That any and every people has a right to self-government . . . In this belief, while I assert for our Government the highest military prerogatives, I am willing to bear in patience that political nonsense of . . . State Rights, freedom of conscience, freedom of press, and other such trash as have deluded the Southern people into war, anarchy, bloodshed, and the foulest crimes that have disgraced any time or any people.

I would advise the commanding officers at Huntsville and such other towns as are occupied by our troops, to assemble the inhabitants and explain to them these plain, self-evident propositions, and tell them that it is for them now to say whether they and their children shall inherit their share. The Government of the United States has in North Alabama any and all rights which they choose to enforce in war -- to take their lives, their homes, their lands, their everything . . . and war is simply power unrestrained by constitution or compact. If they want eternal warfare, well and good; we will accept the issue and dispossess them, and put our friends in possession. Many, many people, with less pertinacity than the South, have been wiped out of national existence.

To those who submit to the rightful law and authority, all gentleness and forbearance; but to the petulant and persistent secessionists, why, death is mercy, and the quicker he or she is disposed of the better. Satan and the rebellious saints of heaven were allowed a continuance of existence in hell merely to swell their just punishment."

W.T. Sherman,
Major General Commanding

(Reminiscences of Public Men in Alabama, William Garrett, Plantation Printing Company's Press, 1872, pp. 486-488)