

The Other Reparations Movement

by **Thomas J. DiLorenzo**

Jack Kershaw of Memphis, Tennessee, wants to file a class-action lawsuit against the US government for reparations. Not on behalf of the descendants of slaves but on behalf of Southerners of all races whose ancestors were the victims of the US government's rampage of pillaging, plundering, burning, and raping of Southern civilians during the War for Southern Independence.



Sherman the Mass Murderer

In 1860 international law — and the US government's own military code — prohibited the intentional targeting of civilians in war, although it was recognized that civilian casualties are always inevitable. "Foraging" to feed an army was acceptable, but compensation was also called for. The kind of wanton looting and destruction of private property that was practiced by the Union army for the entire duration of the war was forbidden, and perpetrators were to be imprisoned or hanged. This was all described in great detail in the book, *International Law*, authored by San Francisco attorney Henry Halleck, who was appointed by Lincoln as general in chief of the Union armies in July 1862.

International law, the US army's own military code, and common rules of morality and decency that existed at the time were abandoned by the Union army from the very beginning. A special kind of soldier was used to pillage and plunder private property in the South during the war. In *The Hard Hand of War* Mark Grimsley writes that the federal Army of the Potomac "possessed its full quotient of thieves, freelance foragers, and officers willing to look the other way," and that "as early as October 1861" General Louis Blenker's division "was already burning houses and public buildings along its line of march" in Virginia. Prior to the Battle of First Manassas in the early summer of 1861 the Army of the Potomac was marked by "robbing hen roosts, killing hogs, slaughtering beef cattle, cows, the burning of a house or two and the plundering of others."

In *Marching through Georgia* Sherman biographer Lee Kennett noted that Sherman's New York regiments "were filled with big city criminals and foreigners fresh from the jails of the Old World."

Unable to subdue their enemy combatants, many Union officers waged war on civilians instead, with Lincoln's full knowledge and approval. Grimsley describes how Union Colonel John Beatty warned the residents of Paint Rock, Alabama, that "Every time the telegraph wire was cut we would burn a house; every time a train was fired upon we would hang a man; and we would continue to do this until every house was burned and every man hanged between Decatur and Bridgeport." Beatty ended up burning the entire town of Paint Rock to the ground.



The Union army did not merely gather food for itself; it pillaged, plundered, burned, and raped its way through the South for four years. Grimsley recounts a first hand account of the sacking of Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December of 1862:

Great three-story houses furnished magnificently were broken into and their contents scattered over the floors

and trampled on by the muddy feet of the soldiers. Splendid alabaster vases and pieces of statuary were thrown at 6 and 700 dollar mirrors. Closets of the very finest china were broken into and their contents smashed . . . rosewood pianos piled in the street and burned . . . Identical events occurred in dozens of other Southern cities and towns for four years.

Sherman was the plunder-in-chief, and he had three solid years of practice for his March to the Sea. In the autumn of 1862 Confederate snipers were firing at Union gunboats on the Mississippi River. Unable to apprehend the combatants, Sherman took revenge on the civilian population by burning the entire town of Randolph, Tennessee, to the ground. In a July 31, 1862 letter to his wife Sherman explained that his purpose in the war was "extermination, not of the soldiers alone, that is the least part of the trouble, but the people."



In the spring of 1863, *after the Confederate Army had evacuated*, Sherman ordered his army to destroy the town of Jackson, Mississippi. They did, and in a letter to General Ulysses S. Grant Sherman boasted that "The inhabitants [of Jackson] are subjugated. They cry aloud for mercy. The land is devastated for 30 miles around."

Meridian, Mississippi was also destroyed after the Confederate Army had evacuated, after which Sherman wrote to Grant: "For five days, ten thousand of our men worked hard and with a will, in that work of destruction, with axes, sledges, crowbars, clawbars, and with fire, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing the work well done. Meridian . . . no longer exists."

In *Citizen Sherman* Michael Fellman describes how Sherman's chief engineer, Captain O.M. Poe, advised that the bombing of Atlanta was of no military significance (the Confederates had already abandoned the city) and implored Sherman to stop the bombardment after viewing the carcasses of dead women and children in the streets. Sherman coldly told him the dead bodies were "a beautiful sight" and commenced the destruction of 90 percent of all the buildings in Atlanta. After that, the remaining 2,000 residents were evicted from their homes just as winter was approaching.

In October of 1864 Sherman even ordered the murder of randomly chosen citizens in retaliation for Confederate Army attacks. He wrote to General Louis D. Watkins: "Cannot you send over about Fairmount and Adairsville, burn ten or twelve houses . . ., kill a few at random, and let them know that it will be repeated every time a train is fired upon . . ." (See John Bennett Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War*, p. 137).

The indiscriminate bombing of Southern cities, which was outlawed by international law at the time, killed hundreds, if not thousands of slaves. The slaves were targeted by Union Army plunderers as much as anyone. As Grimsley writes, "With the utter disregard for blacks that was the norm among Union troops, the soldiers ransacked the slave cabins, taking whatever they liked." A typical practice was to put a hangman's noose around a slave's neck and threaten to hang him unless he revealed where the household's jewelry and silverware were hidden. Some slaves were beaten to death by Union soldiers.



General Phillip Sheridan engaged in the same kind of cowardly, criminal behavior in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in the autumn of 1864, after the Confederates had finally evacuated the valley. General Grant ordered him to turn the valley into a "desert," and he and his army did. A sergeant in Sheridan's army, William T. Patterson, described the pillaging, plundering, and burning of Harrisonburg, Bridgewater, and Dayton Virginia:

The work of destruction is commencing in the suburbs of the town . . . The whole country around is wrapped in flames, the heavens are aglow with the light thereof . . . such mourning, such lamentations, such crying and pleading for mercy I never saw nor never want to see again, some were wild, crazy, mad, some cry for help while others throw their arms around yankee soldiers necks and implore mercy. (See Roy Morris, Jr., [Sheridan](#), p. 184.)

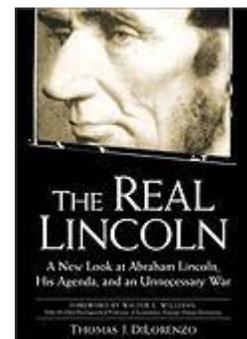
It is important to recognize that at the time the Valley was populated only by women, children, and old men who were too feeble to be in the army. In letters home some of Sheridan's soldiers described themselves as "barn burners" and "destroyers of homes." One soldier wrote that he had personally burned more than 60 private homes to the ground, as Grimsley recounts. After Sheridan's work of destruction and theft was finished Lincoln grandly conveyed to him his personal thanks and "the thanks of a nation."

Historian Lee Kennett, author of *Marching through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians during Sherman's Campaign*, wrote an article in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* last year in which he argued that Southerners had been too critical of Sherman. His book is very favorable to Sherman and Lincoln, but he nevertheless wrote on page 286 that:

Had the Confederates somehow won, had their victory put them in position to bring their chief opponents before some sort of tribunal, they would have found themselves justified (as victors generally do) in stringing up President Lincoln and the entire Union high command for violation of the laws of war, specifically for waging war against noncombatants.

If Mr. Kershaw's lawsuit goes to trial, Lincoln and his high command will finally be put before a tribunal, of sorts. He probably has little if any hope of winning such a case (in federal court!), but the trial record would go a long way toward combating the

whitewashing of history that has occurred for the past 140 years.



August 19, 2002



Thomas J. DiLorenzo [[send him mail](#)] is the author of the LRC #1 bestseller, [The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War](#) (Forum/Random House, 2002) and professor of economics at Loyola College in Maryland.

Copyright © 2002 LewRockwell.com