

Merchant of Terror:

General Sherman and Total War

Monday, January 23, 2017



NEVER FORGET

February 16, 1865

Columbia, SC

As of April 24, 1863, the Northern armies were officially guided by Francis Lieber's General Orders 100, Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field, which prohibited robbery, sacking, pillage rape, wounding maiming or killing of the South's inhabitants. Observance of these instructions seemed to be the exception rather than the rule.

Bernhard Thuersam, www.Circa1865.com The Great American Political Divide

From William Sherman to William Calley

“Paradoxically . . . Union General William Tecumseh Sherman [gradually] evolved his own personal philosophy of war along lines which were clearly at variance with the official pronouncements [of the North’s and in his practical application of that philosophy became one of the first of the modern generals to revert to the use of military force against the civilian population of the enemy.

While this represents only a part of the present concept of total war, its significance lies in Sherman’s demonstration of the effectiveness of a plan of action which would destroy the enemy’s economic system and terrify and demoralize the civilian population.

Sherman’s conduct, reflected in the actions of his men, demonstrated a strange hatred - one without parallel even in World War II. Even as brutal as the Japanese were to prisoners and to civilians who came under their bayonets, there was no demand in United States newspapers for the burning, sacking and pillaging of towns. Nor was there any public sentiment for the humiliation of civilians.

No efforts are made here to show that Sherman’s program of terror was original with him. It is evident that he was willing to proceed in the face of official pronouncements to the contrary to apply the terrifying force of an uncontrolled soldiery against noncombatants.

It is likewise evident that he would not dare do so without the tacit approval of Abraham Lincoln and General Grant. Sherman pleaded that he could not control his troops in the face of their righteous indignation against those who would rebel against a benign government. The pages of recent history reveal that this plea was reiterated by both Japanese and German generals as they mounted the steps of scaffolds to which they were condemned by international tribunals.

There were extreme and unnecessary cruelties involving civilians in the Korean action. However, it was in the highly dramatic court martial of Lt. [William] Calley that the army undertook to point up the brutal attack upon civilians in the village of My Lai, South Vietnam.

The nation and the world was shocked at the pictures and detailed accounts of witnesses which placed upon the consciences of people everywhere the details of the massacre of the inhabitants, including women and children, of My Lai.

There can be little doubt that Sherman’s actions toward a proud and almost defenseless people left a heritage of hate which lasted far longer than it might otherwise have lasted.”

(Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War; John Bennett Walters, Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973, excerpt, pp. xxii-xxiii)