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Sherman and His Historians: An End to the Outsized Destroyer Myth?

Mitchell G. Klingenberg

ABSTRACT: For years, scholars have viewed the career of William Tecumseh Sherman in light of an antiquated destroyer myth and neglected his memoirs, which were written as a military textbook. This essay reviews Sherman's legacy and literature, both of which contributed to the advancement of modern military thought. His experiences may serve as a prescriptive text to servicemembers, providing critical lessons on military warfare and philosophy still relevant today.

William Tecumseh Sherman emerged from the American Civil War as a demon who practiced no restraint against noncombatants. This impression found widespread acceptance, especially among Lost Cause apologists. More than 150 years after the fact, the trope that Sherman initiated total war in America has colored popular, scholarly, and even professional military opinions. Even Henry James—foremost among literary modernists—regarded Sherman as a terrible “Destroyer.”¹ A scholar at the University of Chicago, writing under the spell of the Lost Cause and in the shadow of technological advances that marked World War II, claimed “from the military policies of Sherman and Sheridan there lies but an easy step to the total war of the Nazis, the greatest affront to Western civilization since its founding.”² Charles Royster’s award-winning *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* strengthened this association between the vengeful prosecution of war in nineteenth-century America and the federal commander.³ Other historians have perceived total war—the deliberate targeting of civilians and economic resources—as a distinctly American phenomenon, and Sherman as its key architect.⁴ Michael Fellman, in his critical psychohistory of Sherman, depicts the general as full of bloodlust and as a near lunatic who celebrated the destruction he wrought.⁵

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1. Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1907), 167.

2. Richard M. Weaver, “Southern Chivalry and Total War,” *Sewanee Review* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 277.

3. Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

4. Lance Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860–1880,” *Journal of Military History* 59, no. 1 (January 1995): 7–26; and T. Harry Williams, *The History of American Wars: From 1745 to 1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 312.

5. Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

Scholars no longer regard the Civil War as total, a revision that should have absolved Sherman of waging limitless war against the South as his fiercest critics alleged, yet students of the general seem unable to escape the destroyer myth.⁶ Some have added nuance to old views and conclude Sherman's hard-war policies were grounded in his tremendous intellect, respect for law, intuitive grasp of modern democracies at war, or grand strategic vision.⁷ Others have breathed new life into the destroyer narrative. For example, a student monograph from the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies claimed federal operational and strategic ends necessitated Sherman's use of total war.⁸ Predictably, in writing against old myths, or in refashioning them, scholars have added to their durability.

By accepting the destroyer narrative and viewing Sherman's campaigns through the prism of total war, students of war have lost sight of Sherman. They have ignored Sherman's lessons in the realm of operational art derived from campaigning across the upper and lower South: lessons, Sherman believed, that in logistics as well as "grand and minor tactics . . . added new luster to the old science of war."⁹ These lessons shaped the general's postwar thought and came with serious implications for the American profession of arms. Emphasis on Sherman's contribution to American military strategies of annihilation and maneuver have obscured the general's influence on the institutional development of the US Army.¹⁰ Linking Sherman's mastery of logistics to federal strategy in the Civil War is warranted, but absent other considerations, it neglects the fact that Sherman took his knowledge and experiences and arrived at the conviction that, in future wars, American officers should possess the command faculties to perform what he had accomplished. It was largely for this reason Sherman established postgraduate professional schools for US Army soldiers, the purposes of which were to produce ideal staff officers with experience of military operations at a "model Post."¹¹

6. Mark E. Neely Jr., "Was the Civil War a Total War?," *Civil War History* 37, no. 1 (March 1991): 5–28; Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, "Total War and the American Civil War Reconsidered: The End of an Outdated 'Master Narrative,'" *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 3 (September 2011): 394–408; D. H. Dilbeck, *A More Civil War: How the Union Waged a Just War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

7. John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007); and James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country, A Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

8. Christopher S. Hoffman, *Major General William T. Sherman's Total War in the Savannah and Carolina Campaigns* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2018).

9. William T. Sherman, "The Grand Strategy of the Last Year of the War," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 4 (New York: De Vinne Press, 1888), 250.

10. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 148–52; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1993); and Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 216–25.

11. Marszalek, *Sherman*, 442.

To understand Sherman as a whole, it is necessary to look beyond the Civil War and take a longer view of his US Army career. Sherman's record was not bound to his grasp of strategy or military operations; nor was it confined to his understanding of democracies or modern industrial societies at war. Rather, a holistic view of Sherman places the commander within the wider stream of Army institutional history. This view would do less to scrutinize Sherman's tenure as Commanding General of the US Army (a post noted for the frustration it brought to Sherman) as a missed opportunity for Army reform. Similarly, Sherman's establishment of the Artillery School of Practice in 1875 at Fort Monroe, Virginia, and the School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1881, merit reassessment. Hardly evidence of Sherman's "conservative nature regarding military science," the creation of these postgraduate, professional-military institutions demonstrates how critical it was for Sherman that future soldiers apply military science of the day to campaigning, all with an eye toward fighting the next large-scale war.¹² Finally, Sherman must be understood as he viewed himself: as a teacher of war. Described in great detail in the *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*—a prescriptive text full of recommendations for military practitioners that has been misunderstood by scholars and warfighters alike—Sherman's campaigns yielded lessons that later found application as subsequent generations of US Army officers studied and practiced the art of war.¹³

Tethered to His Time?

Sherman's biographers have grasped some of these features, but only in part. Several have noted Sherman's intent to "bring the Line and Staff into closer harmony" during his tenure as Commanding General of the Army and thereby mitigate organizational problems that resulted from the general in chief's inability to requisition supply from the various bureaus and departments within the War Department.¹⁴ This arrangement, which Sherman regarded as an "absurdity," had long hindered the effectiveness of military organization. The question of who controlled the army and its resources—the commanding general or the secretary of war—was vigorously contested and never totally resolved.¹⁵ Yet with little variation, interpretations of Sherman's postwar efforts as a military reformer converge upon the conclusion that, insofar as he pursued postwar reforms, he attained modest results because he failed to end insoluble rivalries between the line, staff, and civil authorities.¹⁶

12. Marszalek, *Sherman*, 442.

13. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*, ed. Charles Royster (New York: Library of America, 1990).

14. "Tenth Anniversary Meeting," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 10, no. 37 (March 1889): 141.

15. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 896, 932–33; William B. Skelton, "The Commanding Generals and the Question of Civil Control in the Antebellum U.S. Army," *American Nineteenth Century History* 7, no. 2 (June 2006): 153–72.

16. Richard Allen Lewis, "Years of Frustration: William T. Sherman, The Army, and Reform, 1869–1883" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1968).

Liddell Hart's classic assessment of Sherman offers a case in point. He concludes of Sherman's supposed failure and subsequent decision to travel overseas to escape the fraught nature of civil-military politics, "if [Sherman] could not maintain his own world he could at least enlarge his knowledge of the world."¹⁷ Similarly, Fellman has noted, to whatever extent Sherman encouraged reform in some abstract sense, the general in chief nevertheless remained a "narrow and inflexible conservator of a tiny military elite" who fought least for change when it mattered most.¹⁸ John Marszalek's classic study provides a robust assessment of Sherman's tenure as commanding general, but it dwells on Sherman's political fights with the Congress and with the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant. Marszalek concedes "in many ways, Sherman . . . tried to hang on rather than innovate," and perceives in Sherman a basic pragmatism oriented toward "[convincing] a hostile nonmilitary world that army officers were professionals."¹⁹ Steven Woodworth also notes the political feuds that marked the commanding general's tenure—Sherman famously refused in 1873 to submit his annual report to the War Department, citing the secretary of war's control of the Army, and in 1874 moved his headquarters to St. Louis to escape Washington politics—even as it reiterates Sherman's unwavering commitment to military professionalism.²⁰ James Lee McDonough devotes only a handful of pages in the weightiest of Sherman biographies to the commanding general's attempts at military reform and reaches similar conclusions.²¹

Studies of US Army preparedness and professionalization in the postwar years are similarly limited. They view Sherman as too moored to the Civil War, which he perceived to be authoritative, since it was—at least in the American view—the definitive military event of the nineteenth century. Scholar-strategist J. P. Clark, in *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917*, contends such officers as Sherman "held a more rosy view of generalship during the war and consequently were more inclined to believe that drastic changes to the army's means of preparing officers for war were not necessary."²² Like Marszalek, Clark considers this view an innate conservatism. While Clark acknowledges Sherman and his peers were not "unthinking traditionalists," still in "deriving their identity from conflict" they shared a common "conceptual horizon."²³ Clark concludes that for Sherman the Civil War as an "intellectual tether limiting how far the

17. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier*, 412–13.

18. Fellman, *Citizen Sherman*, 291.

19. Marszalek, *Sherman*, 443.

20. Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman: Lessons in Leadership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 171–73.

21. McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 665–69, 684–85.

22. J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 129.

23. Clark, *Preparing for War*, 129.

profession could stray from past forms,” an assessment that does not square with the Commanding General of the Army who declared, in 1883, the nation, having “passed through its measles and whooping-cough period,” stood “at the opening of a new epoch” and “on the threshold of a new era.”²⁴

Assessments of Sherman’s conservatism, whether framed in his failed pursuit of organizational reform, or in his purportedly modest capability to theorize about the future of war, miss the mark. They diminish lessons the Civil War bequeathed to the profession of arms and present Sherman as an uncritical soldier whose instincts were oriented toward preserving an institutional status quo. It is true, as commanding general, Sherman underscored the necessity of practical learning and familiarity with the duties of company-level command believing the company was “the basis of all good armies,” hence, good company commanders in time would prove competent generals.²⁵ It is also true Sherman did not place equal emphasis on the instruction of senior-level command, or what the US Army now considers strategic leadership as a category of professional knowledge.

Yet, to interpret these points as evidence of Sherman’s conservatism is to miss how he viewed intellect and practical action as working in concert to advance sound knowledge of the principles of campaigning and warfighting. For example, Sherman displayed great interest in professional military literature and nurtured the intellectual curiosity of officers, even penning short, analytical responses to articles he read in the *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*.²⁶ Sherman served on the Military Service Institution’s board that selected awards for the most insightful and original articles published in the journal.²⁷ In his remarks on the institution’s tenth anniversary, Sherman emphasized all US Army and Navy officers should read widely in times of peace on matters historical, legal, and ethical, in addition to the latest professional literature.²⁸ Yet, he also cautioned soldiers in their scholarly pursuits should not neglect “the rudiments . . . the squad, company and battalion drill, the care of men, horses, wagons, etc., and the thousand and one things learned by absolute contact with soldiers but not from books.”²⁹ Sherman was “wily” and inquisitive, quick to talk, and always eager to hear the lessons his brothers-in-arms derived from their war

24. Clark, *Preparing for War*, 129; William T. Sherman, discussion response to Albert G. Brackett, “Our Cavalry: Its Duties, Hardships, and Necessities at Our Frontier Posts,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 4 (1883): 392.

25. A. C. Sharpe, “Organization and Training of a National Reserve for Military Service,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 10, no. 37 (March 1889): 17.

26. William T. Sherman, “Military Law,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 1, no. 1 (January 1880): 129–32.

27. “Annual Prize Essay,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 3, no. 12 (1882): 501.

28. “Tenth Anniversary Meeting,” 140.

29. “Tenth Anniversary Meeting,” 140.

experiences.³⁰ Even so, Sherman demonstrated little patience in the postwar years for criticisms of his campaigns from officers who lacked the skills, as he saw it, to “move a battalion properly, in the presence of the enemy, from Fort Monroe to Newport News.”³¹ Implicit in this statement is Sherman’s knowledge, acquired through extensive campaigning, that the movement of armies required skill. If an officer could not move a battalion, how could he possibly hope to move an army?

While the Civil War provided the dominant paradigm for Sherman, the practical lessons he derived from the war were not unimportant. The Civil War was the first large-scale conflict in global history in which railroads found widespread use and influence in military operations. This fact, and the federal use of waterways to move troops and supplies, bore significant consequences on unprecedented scales for the organization of logistics and expanded spheres of joint warfighting.³² Military operations in the theaters of the Civil War occurred in zones that dwarfed entire swaths of Europe. The distance from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to Richmond, Virginia, for instance, exceeds the distance from Moscow to the Franco-German frontier.³³ Moreover, the topography in these theaters of operation proved uniquely difficult.³⁴

Sherman’s successes in the war, accomplished in its most difficult theater of operations, required careful intellectual study, tremendous attention to detail, and a wealth of personal experience. Sherman drew from geographical knowledge of the South he had acquired firsthand 20 years before.³⁵ Possessed of great imagination and a strong artistic sense, Sherman was able to map and picture roads in his mind.³⁶ In the recesses of his mind were hidden immediate solutions for the minute-to-minute problems encountered during the 1864 Savannah Campaign, especially how to feed, supply, and

30. E. Shippen, “General Sherman,” *United Service: A Monthly Review of Military and Naval Affairs* 5 (April 1891): 340.

31. Sherman quoted in John P. Wisser, “Practical Instructions in Minor Tactics,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 8, no. 30 (June 1887): 138.

32. Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 3–4.

33. Willey Howell, “Lieutenant-General Grant’s Campaign of 1864–65, I,” *Military Historian and Economist* 1, no. 2 (April 1916): 113–36; Willey Howell, “Lieutenant-General Grant’s Campaign of 1864–65, II,” *Military Historian and Economist* 1, no. 3 (August 1916): 274–95; Arthur L. Wagner, *Strategy: A Lecture Delivered by Colonel Arthur L. Wagner, Assistant Adjutant-General, U.S.A., to the Officers of the Regular Army and National Guard at the Maneuvers at West Point, Ky., and at Fort Riley, Kansas, 1903* (Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Company, 1904), 28–29; and Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6.

34. Sherman, “Grand Strategy Last Year,” 250; Sherman, *Memoirs*; and Hess, *Civil War Supply*.

35. William T. Sherman, *Address of General William T. Sherman to the Officers and Soldiers Composing the School of Application at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, October 25, 1882* (Leavenworth, KS: 1882), 8; and Sherman, “Grand Strategy Last Year,” 252.

36. William T. Sherman, “To John Sherman,” in *Sherman’s Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860–1865*, ed. Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 786.

protect his army in hostile territory.³⁷ These were herculean efforts that “taxed and measured forethought, energy, patience, and watchfulness” with utmost severity.³⁸ Prior to the campaign, Sherman knew by county the number of horses, hogs, beeves, and bushels of corn the land contained and how best to feed his army.³⁹ His memoirs are chock-full of references to provisions and the movement of men, mules, and materiel.⁴⁰ Additionally, they demonstrate the empirical habit of mind required for careful mathematical tabulations.

Leadership for Sherman was not mere adherence to a particular theory of command that moved soldiers by moral or physical example. Rather it was a precise knowledge of an army’s integral parts and a firm understanding of how all elements combined to produce unity of action—all to the end that a commander must act to keep his army intact and project power. “To do noble deeds is the end,” Sherman declared in 1889. He continued, “Action and intelligence must be combined.”⁴¹ Interpreted in this light, officers at the Artillery or the Infantry and Cavalry Schools were not merely participants in mundane forms of garrison duty, but rather practitioners learning to integrate practical knowledge of field armies with relevant study of military theory.

By the eve of the twentieth century, the Infantry and Cavalry School at Fort Leavenworth had clearly established itself as an institution where officers acquired practical field experience and engaged in serious intellectual work. Required readings featured books useful for an Army officer on the frontier such as William Carter’s *Horses, Saddles, and Bridles*, but also covered high-level matters, such as staff-level planning and execution of military operations, and constitutional, international, and military law.⁴² Students attended lectures on a variety of military subjects. They considered the historical development of field and coastal fortifications. Lectures on the military geographies of Canada, Chile, Mexico, and Central America demonstrated evidence of a widening strategic self-awareness and sense of

37. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 212; and Henry Davenport Northrop, *Life and Deeds of General Sherman: Including the Story of His Great March to the Sea* (Cleveland: Lauer & Mattill, 1891), 562–63.

38. Thomas M. Vincent, “The Military Power of the United States, Indicated During the War of the Rebellion, 1861–’65, By: 1) The Mobilization and Disbandment of the Volunteer Forces. 2) The Logistical Measures, Attaching to the Staff Departments and Corps. In Other Words, the Science of the Staff,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 2, no. 5–8 (1881): 262.

39. Albert G. Brackett, “General William T. Sherman,” *United Service: A Monthly Review of Military and Naval Affairs* 5 (June 1891): 578.

40. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 649, 653, 658–61, 879–82.

41. “Tenth Anniversary Meeting,” 141.

42. William H. Carter, *Horses, Saddles, and Bridles* (Leavenworth, KS: Ketcheson & Reeves, 1895); Thomas M. Cooley, *The General Principles of Constitutional Law in the United States of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1880); William Winthrop, *Military Law and Precedents*, revised, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1896); and *Regulations and Programme of Instruction of the U.S. Infantry and Cavalry School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1895* (Leavenworth, KS: United States Infantry and Cavalry School, 1895).

American military power on an international scale.⁴³ Officers theorized about military technologies and their effects in shaping the character of modern war.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, they also took wider views, studying how nations of the world “[embraced] all preparations made and considerations entertained to meet the contingency of war”—in a word, military policy.⁴⁵

Scholars have long advanced the view that Sherman did not intend for the institutions he established to become laboratories of military thought. Drawing from Sherman’s correspondence, Marszalek and Clark claim his interest in postgraduate education for officers apparently went no further than the Artillery School of Practice and later the Infantry and Cavalry School, and that cultivating an intellectual habit of mind in officers through formal education was not among Sherman’s goals for these institutions.⁴⁶ Such interpretations accord with the findings of Timothy Nenner, Carol Reardon, and Todd Brereton in their classic studies of education and professionalism in the officer corps.⁴⁷ It is perhaps true Sherman could not have imagined how the curriculum at the Infantry and Cavalry School would evolve over time, and it would be an exaggeration to cite him as the individual solely responsible for the sort of learning that happened there. Nevertheless, claims that Sherman possessed only modest designs for professional military education flatten the general’s well-documented plans for practical and intellectual officers to command the Army in the future and misunderstand the prescriptive nature of his memoirs.⁴⁸

The Memoirs as Prescriptive Military Text

Sherman began work on his memoirs sometime after 1870, and in 1875, D. Appleton and Company in New York published the *Memoirs of General*

43. C. H. Muir, *An Historical Sketch of Permanent Fortifications: A Lecture Delivered before the Class of Officers at the United States Infantry and Cavalry School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, October 29th, 1896* (Leavenworth, KS: United States Infantry and Cavalry School, May 1897); and Arthur Lockwood Wagner et al., *Military Geography: Lectures in the Department of Military Art, Delivered before the Class of Officers at the U.S. Infantry and Cavalry School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1893–1895* (Leavenworth, KS: United States Infantry and Cavalry School, 1895).

44. Joseph T. Dickman, *Balloons in War: A Lecture Delivered before the Class of Officers at the United States Infantry and Cavalry School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, March 27th, 1896* (Leavenworth, KS: United States Infantry and Cavalry School, April 1896).

45. Joseph T. Dickman, *Military Policy and Institutions: A Lecture Delivered before the Class of Officers at the United States Infantry and Cavalry School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, January 16th, 1896* (Leavenworth, KS: United States Infantry and Cavalry School, December 1896), 5.

46. Marszalek, *Sherman*, 442; and Clark, *Preparing for War*, 130–31.

47. Timothy K. Nenner, *The Leavenworth Schools and the Old Army: Education, Professionalism, and the Officer Corps of the United States Army, 1881–1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 21–31; Carol Reardon, *Soldiers and Scholars: The U.S. Army and the Uses of Military History, 1865–1920* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 14; and T. R. Brereton, *Educating the U.S. Army: Arthur L. Wagner and Reform, 1875–1905* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 13–14.

48. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1967), 273.

W. T. Sherman as a two-volume set. The *Memoirs* were an instant sensation, selling thousands of copies at seven dollars apiece, though how much they profited Sherman in the long run seems unclear.⁴⁹ Admirers wrote to him expressing their approval. But the *Memoirs* also generated political opposition and resulted in a pamphlet war, prompting Sherman to issue a revised and expanded edition in 1886.⁵⁰ On the whole, however, appreciation for Sherman's reminiscences—buoyed by praise from Ulysses S. Grant—surpassed criticisms of the work.⁵¹ In an appendix to his three-volume history of the Civil War, a leading European scholar declared Sherman's memoirs were of “incomparable value” to the historian.⁵²

Although Sherman's memoirs are amongst the most-cited sources for students of the Civil War seeking to understand his military career, historians have neglected the specific way he describes his military experiences and his purposes for taking this approach. One critic dismisses Sherman's memoirs as self-serving, treats them as a medium through which the general settled old scores, and gives the impression the text is unreliable.⁵³ Other scholars have wrongly assumed Sherman intended merely to write about the war as a historical event, and as a result the *Memoirs* have been underutilized as an instructional text. More than the fascinating anecdotes they contain, the *Memoirs* shed light on Sherman's knowledge of warfighting and its organizational demands. They invite students of war to see firsthand the complex dynamics of leading a field army in large-scale combat operations. Only in analytical works of Civil War logistics and supply have the *Memoirs* received proper treatment in this regard.⁵⁴

Similarly, students of military history have not wrestled with the important question of why Sherman published his memoirs. Russell Weigley's 1962 assertion, that Sherman deliberately composed the *Memoirs* to influence future generations of military practitioners, and his later observation that Sherman's achievement “[was] almost unique among such literary efforts in their thoughtfulness about the future of war,” have gone almost unnoticed.⁵⁵

49. Charles Royster, “Note on the Text,” in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 1121; McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 709; and Marszalek, *Sherman*, 457–58.

50. See entry for 1875 in Charles Royster, “Chronology,” in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 1112.

51. John Russell Young, *Around the World with General Grant: A Narrative of the Visit of General U. S. Grant, Ex-President of the United States, to Various Countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa, in 1877, 1878, 1879: To Which Are Added Certain Conversations with General Grant on Questions Connected with American Politics and History*, vol. 2 (New York: American News Company, 1879), 290–91.

52. Louis-Philippe-Albert d'Orléans, *History of the Civil War in America*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1888), 853.

53. Fellman, *Citizen Sherman*.

54. Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017); and Hess, *Civil War Supply*.

55. Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 83; and Weigley, *History United States Army*, 273.

This failure illuminates the disconnect between what historians profess to know about operational military history and what students of the war actually know about its crucial aspects. Memoirs of the war published in the postbellum era were legion but contributed little to the advancement of military thought.⁵⁶ As Weigley wrote:

*Sherman sought throughout his Memoirs to underline the strategic, tactical, and logistical lessons of the war. Conspicuously among the memoirists, he wrote a concluding chapter in which he tried to sum up the military precepts suggested by his experience. No other Civil War memoir comes so close to being a military textbook.*⁵⁷

Indeed, Sherman so desired the principles he derived from his wartime experiences to be prescriptive, he titled the ultimate chapter (in the first edition of his memoirs) and the penultimate chapter (in the revised and expanded edition) “Military Lessons of the War.” The instructive character of his memoirs is best understood in the context of Sherman’s conviction, expressed in an 1885 paper read before the Military Service Institution of the United States, that memoir and biography—the record of history—are “philosophy teaching by example.”⁵⁸

There are also deeper meanings to “Military Lessons of the War.” Much of the chapter functions as a philosophical reflection, in the Clausewitzian sense, on the nature of armed conflict. Sherman makes explicit references to the Crimean and Franco-Prussian wars and their military lessons.⁵⁹ Sherman wrote this chapter after his African, European, and Mediterranean tours from 1871 to 1872—during which he visited Austria, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Russia, Spain, Scotland, Switzerland, and Turkey—a panoramic event that enabled him to travel to European battlefields and to engage in careful, comparative evaluation of military policy.⁶⁰ Travel also afforded Sherman opportunities to ponder the character of modern warfare in an international context.⁶¹ Conditions in the United States, he concluded, diverged significantly from those in much of Europe. Hardly evidence of his conservatism, this fact points to Sherman’s eagerness to consider alternative modes of military policy—as well as his boundless enthusiasm for studying

56. Weigley, *Towards an American Army*, 83.

57. Weigley, *Towards an American Army*, 83.

58. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 873; William T. Sherman, “The Militia,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 6, no. 21 (March 1885): 3.

59. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 887.

60. Royster, “Chronology,” in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 1111; Sherman, *Memoirs*, 893–94; William T. Sherman, “Sherman on Franco-Prussian Battlefields: Extracts from General William T. Sherman’s Diary of His European Tour in 1872,” *Century Magazine* 58, no. 2 (June 1899): 278.

61. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 885.

armies, fortifications, and military schools—and to draw his own conclusions.⁶² Far from being a provincial theorist tethered to the American Civil War, Sherman possessed a cosmopolitan outlook and demonstrated a willingness to graft, wherever useful, the best of European military thought and practice into his profession of arms.

These points have escaped Sherman biographers. Although Liddell Hart possessed impressive knowledge of Sherman's role as a military theorist, and perceived in his 1864 and 1865 campaigns the apotheosis of the indirect approach, he is silent on the theoretical aspects of Sherman's *Memoirs*.⁶³ Marszalek concludes, curiously, the *Memoirs* contain "too little insight into [Sherman's] philosophy of war."⁶⁴ Noteworthy among Sherman's chroniclers for his attention to the *Memoirs* as a work of military science is British historian Brian Holden Reid, who observes Sherman's opus reflected the commanding general's military priorities and was unique in revealing its author's "prime interest in the technical military dimensions of the war."⁶⁵ Alone of all Sherman scholars, Holden Reid correctly perceives the value of the *Memoirs* as less in their historical qualities—though they introduced important correspondence and official records from the Civil War into public view—than in their contribution to the advancement of military thought and Army professionalization in the United States.⁶⁶

Sherman outlined numerous lessons in his memoirs, encompassing an array of subjects pertinent to warfighting and developing a future fighting force: unit organization from company to corps; campaign logistics and supply; communications and technology; provisions and subsistence, as well as the nutrition and health of soldiers in a field army; the importance of education for civilian officers, and for officers trained at the United States Military Academy; the requisite size of the peacetime army to maintain preparedness and allow for rapid mobilization; the necessity of reforming the command structure of the army by subordinating bureaus under the auspices of the War Department to the authority of the

62. See, for instance, William T. Sherman, "General Sherman in Russia: Extracts from the Diary of General W. T. Sherman," *Century Magazine* 57, no. 5 (March 1899): 866–75.

63. B. H. Liddell Hart, "The Signpost that was Missed," *Infantry Journal* 41, no. 6 (November–December 1934): 405–11; and Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier*, 418–19.

64. Marszalek, *Sherman*, 462.

65. Brian Holden Reid, *The Scourge of War: The Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 451–52.

66. Holden Reid, *Scourge War*, 452.

commanding general; civil-military relations; and the discipline, habits, courage, and intelligence required of a general officer.⁶⁷

As with his precise campaign summaries, Sherman offered astute local insights in “Military Lessons of the War.” His observation that the corps was “the true unit for grand campaigns and battle” and should maintain a complete staff and possess all means for independent action, in any theater, pointed to how the US Army would fight in future wars.⁶⁸ Additionally, this chapter demonstrates Sherman’s belief in the promise of military education. While the Civil War proved capable volunteer officers could rise from civilian life, Sherman wrote, even these officers expressed regret at not having studied the “elementary principles of the art of war,” a knowledge that might have spared them the hard experience of learning military operations in the “dangerous and expensive school of actual war.”⁶⁹

Not long after the *Memoirs* appeared, Sherman’s lessons made strong impressions on younger officers looking to shape the intellectual culture of their profession. Upon first glance, little is surprising about this impact since the *Memoirs*, like Grant’s and General Philip Sheridan’s reminiscences, were recommended reading for lieutenants preparing for US Army careers.⁷⁰ Almost immediately, however, Sherman’s memoirs assumed a greater stature. On subjects ranging from tactics to telegraphic communications, and as a historical record, young officers appealed to the *Memoirs* as an authoritative text.⁷¹ This trend continued into the twentieth century. American soldiers in the new US Army drew from Sherman’s experience in military policy, noting the need for an abundant supply of well-trained regulars to anticipate mobilization, and from Sherman’s expertise in logistics, citing the *Memoirs* for the distance an army could operate away from its base of supply.⁷² Drawing from the *Memoirs*, and from Sherman’s recommendation to abolish the knapsack as an article of US Army equipment, a French officer cited Sherman’s 1864 experience as a helpful guide for determining the maximum weight an infantryman could carry without compromising combat

67. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 873–99.

68. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 876.

69. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 878.

70. James A. Moss, *Officers’ Manual* (Springfield, MA: F. A. Bassette Company, 1906), 39; and “From the U.S. Military Academy, April, 1903,” *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association* 14, no. 49 (July 1903): 152.

71. John Bigelow Jr., “The Sabre and Bayonet Question,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 3, no. 9 (1882): 79; F. C. Grugan, “The Use, Development and Influence of the Electric Telegraph in Warfare,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 3, no. 11 (1882): 380; L. W. V. Kennon, “Considerations Regarding the ‘Battle Tactics’ of Infantry,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 7, no. 25 (March 1886): 20, 43, 45; and W. S. Scott, “Kilpatrick’s Raid Around Atlanta, August 18th to 22d [sic], 1864,” *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association* 3, no. 10 (September 1880): 270.

72. H. B. Ferguson, “Recruitment, Mobilization, and Concentration,” *Journal of the United States Infantry Association* 4, no. 3 (November 1907): 382–83; and John B. Barnes, “Theater of War,” *Journal of the United States Infantry Association* 4, no. 4 (January 1908): 596, 598, 603.

effectiveness.⁷³ Hoping to avoid the casualties claimed in World War I, officers of the interwar period saw in Sherman's aversion to pitched battle a blueprint for success in future armed conflicts.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In January 1865, while planning his advance against Charleston, South Carolina, from Savannah, Georgia, Sherman summoned naval lieutenant Stephen Luce, commander of the USS *Pontiac* (then conducting joint operations with Sherman's army), for a command council. "On reporting to headquarters," Luce recalled in later years, "General Sherman indicated in a few, short, pithy sentences, and by the aid of a map, his plan of campaign." The plan impressed Luce, who likened the experience to a religious conversion: "After hearing General Sherman's clear exposition of the military situation the scales seemed to fall from my eyes . . . It dawned upon me that there are certain principles underlying military operations which it were well to look into; principles of general application whether the operations were conducted on land or at sea."⁷⁵

From this council Luce learned there existed "such a thing as a military problem; and there was a way of solving it; or, what is equally important, a way of determining whether, or not, it was susceptible of solution." Luce concluded the secretary of the navy should possess a staff, and, to fulfill their duties, officers of this staff should undertake "a special course of study."⁷⁶ So inspired, Luce in 1884 helped establish the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and served as its first president.⁷⁷ Sherman's contributions to the intellectual heritage of the US Navy are also born of the fact that, at Alfred Thayer Mahan's request, the general read and commented on a series of lectures that Mahan delivered at the Naval War College and later published in the compendium *Naval Strategy*.⁷⁸ Thus Sherman, the founder of the Army's Command and General Staff College and the inspiration for the Naval War College, ought to be known as the father of joint professional military education.

73. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 882; and Carre, "Historical Review of the Load of the Foot-Soldier—Concluded," trans. P. L. Miles, *Journal of the United States Infantry Association* 5, no. 6 (May 1909): 932.

74. Bernd Greiner, "The Study of the Distant Past is Futile: American Reflections on New Military Frontiers," in *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2003), 248–49.

75. S. B. Luce, "Naval Administration, III," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute* 29, no. 4 (December 1903): 820–21.

76. Luce, "Naval Administration, III," 820–21.

77. Ronald H. Spector, "Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Modern American Navy" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1967), 44–52.

78. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land; Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R. I., between the Years 1887 and 1911* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1911), 124.

Academic historians who have neglected operational art and order-of-battle military history, or who view Sherman entirely through the prism of the Civil War, may be forgiven for seeing him in light of the old destroyer myth. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect specialized treatment of Sherman's acumen for military operations in studies written for popular readerships. All the more reason, then, to celebrate the publication of Holden Reid's *The Scourge of War*, the latest installment in Sherman literature.⁷⁹ Holden Reid probes Sherman's intellect and moves the iconic figure beyond familiar conversations of total war; he assesses Sherman's US Army career at various command echelons from the bottom up to see Sherman's successes and failures at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. On the subject of Sherman's tenure as commanding general, Holden Reid is the most thorough to date and points to new directions in Sherman scholarship.

Operational military historians and military practitioners, however, must be judged more harshly for neglecting the technical lessons Sherman bequeathed to the field. As one historian has written, the soldiers who matriculate through and commence from the US Army Command and General Staff College are Sherman's heirs.⁸⁰ Their vocation has been shaped by the model of professional military education Sherman established, and their future success as staff officers requires a mastery of the principles and skills he learned throughout the campaigns of the Civil War and sought to carry into the future. The lessons of Sherman's era may seem anachronistic to soldiers in the twenty-first century, but any mode of thought that views conditions of the historical present as above and beyond the circumstances of the past is hardly original, let alone helpful. The fact that the question, "Is the study of military history worth while?" (as one soldier put it in 1929), springs forth perennially reveals more about the practitioners who pose it than the usefulness of the past they ignore.⁸¹

Any view that assumes inevitable progress and boundless, revolutionary increases in the complexity of military operations will have its blind spots, and if warfighters are to be empathetic students of the past, they must see through the kind of analysis that comes on the cheap. Such worthy insights require careful study of history, delineating not only its differences from the present, but its continuities. Servicemembers of

79. Holden Reid, *Scourge of War*.

80. Thomas Bruscino, "Introduction: Sherman's Heirs" (unpublished manuscript, consulted January 2021). Cited with the permission of the author.

81. C. M. Bundel, "Is the Study of Military History Worth While?" *Infantry Journal* 34, no. 3 (March 1929): 225–38.

the twenty-first century should remember their predecessors in the Civil War era, the postbellum period, and every age since have typically regarded their epochs as exceptional and as uniquely marked by unthinkable advances in military science. They have always considered the future of warfare with uncertainty, believing it contained far greater complexities than armed conflict in any previous age.⁸² As students of war seeking to anticipate and comprehend its future, members of the Joint force should read the *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* to remind themselves they are not unique, and even their circumstances, while different, are not unprecedented. In the process, they can encounter and emulate William Tecumseh Sherman, one of war's greatest practitioners in any context.

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82. Dickman, "Balloons in War"; and J. Halpin Connolly, "War in a Mechanistic Civilization," *Infantry Journal* 46, no. 4 (July and August 1939): 306.

