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A House Divided: (90) Total War – III

Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is "A House Divided."

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Moving like a plague of locusts, the Union Army of William Tecumseh Sherman chewed its way across Georgia and then South Carolina in an early form of total war. He was determined to smash the Confederacy's ability to prosecute the

rebellion and even more to degrade its will to fight. One soldier wrote, we “destroyed all we could not eat, stole their niggers, burned their cotton and gins, spilled their sorghum, burned and twisted their railroads and raised Hell generally.” Organized into groups of ill-disciplined scroungers known as “bummers,” Yankees ranged over the landscape robbing and pillaging. Primarily intended to feed the Union army, they also tended to take whatever they could lay their hands on. And they were not alone. Georgia had Union sympathizers and many of them pitched in to plunder their rebel neighbors. Freedmen also participated in the destruction as did Confederate deserters and disaffected former rebel soldiers.

In many cases it was just plain vandalism, but Yankee generals and soldiers alike came to see this enterprise as essential to the war effort as any frontal charge on the battlefield. Union Major Henry Hitchcock was conflicted about the whole business, but wrote, “....I deplore this necessity daily and cannot bear to see the soldiers swarm as they do through fields and yards....[yet]...nothing can end this war but some demonstration of their helplessness...we must war upon and destroy the organized rebel forces, - must cut off their supplies, destroy their communications...[and] produce among the people of Georgia a thorough conviction of the personal

misery which attends war, and the utter helplessness and inability of their “rulers,” State or Confederate, to protect them....If that terror and grief and even want shall help to paralyze their husbands and fathers who are fighting us...it is mercy in the end.”

While Sherman’s tactics and similar ones of Philip Sheridan in the Valley of Virginia earned for them generations of Southern bitterness and enmity, there is some evidence that this scorched-earth total-war strategy helped shorten the war by months if not years. One important indication of this was the alarmingly increasing desertion rates in Confederate armies in late 1864 and into 1865. Rebel soldiers and their families had

concluded perhaps much sooner than their leaders that Southern independence and its defense of slavery was a lost cause. Why risk personal mutilation or even death lingering in the ranks of shrinking armies destined for defeat particularly when their families were imperiled and needed them at home? The total war of William Tecumseh Sherman did not defeat the Confederacy but it surely contributed to the collapse of morale and, as he predicted, the will to fight. The ever-prescient diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut could see it coming, “Since Atlanta I have felt as if all were dead within me, forever. We are going to be wiped off the earth.”

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