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Faces of War

Northerners believed the war that broke out with the Southern bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861 would be over in months. But the Confederate army, led by officers whose military prowess far exceeded that of the Union command, proved to be a wily and formidable adversary, and to the dismay of President Lincoln, in the early years of the war—until the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863—decisive victory eluded the Union.

In 1864 Lincoln placed the strong-willed Ulysses S. Grant at the head of all Union forces. Late that same year, as Grant advanced toward Richmond with the Army of the Potomac, the forty-four-year-old General William Tecumseh Sherman drove the western army through three hundred miles of Georgia, cutting a thirty- to sixty-mile wide path of destruction from Atlanta to the sea. To avoid extended supply lines, he ordered his soldiers—nearly sixty thousand men—to "forage liberally on the country" for provisions, supplies, pack animals, and wagons. His commanders were to "enforce a devastation more or less relentless" wherever there was resistance of any kind. Demolitions engineers tore up railroad tracks, heated them, and hung them from trees, and wherever it was "necessary," troops put houses, mills, cotton gins, plantations, and entire towns to the torch. Sherman was determined not only to destroy the South's capacity to wage war but to break its will to resist.

It was as a result of such thinking that he burned Atlanta. In September the mayor of Atlanta had petitioned Sherman to reconsider his order that Atlanta be evacuated because of the "extraordinary hardship" and "inconvenience" it would entail:

> How is it possible for the . . . women and children to find any shelter? And how can they live through the winter in the woods [with] no shelter or subsistence. . . . You know the woe, the horrors, and the suffering, cannot be described by words; imagination can only conceive of it, and we ask you to take these things into consideration. . . . What has this helpless people done, that they should be driven from their homes, to wander strangers and outcasts, and exiles, and to subsist on charity?

As the first document shows, Sherman did not revoke his order. After the evacuation was complete, he ordered the city, already partially burned by retreating rebels, destroyed.

Yet Sherman was not a brutal man. In 1879, eleven years before his death, he addressed the graduating class of a military academy:

> I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.

Perhaps as well as any soldier of his generation, Sherman understood the nature of modern warfare and refused to be sentimental about it. Georgia reeled from the destruction he had brought upon it, but his scorched-earth policies worked. So awful, however, was the devastation of his "March to the Sea" that the physical and psychological wounds inflicted on the South took generations to heal.

The destruction is vividly described by Eliza Andrews in *The War-Time Diary of a Georgia Girl,* a portion of which is reproduced in the second document. In 1864 Andrews was twenty-four and living at a relative's plantation in southwest Georgia, where her father had sent her for safety. Observing the terrible effects of Sherman's march, she recorded how she felt about the destruction, the collapse of the Confederacy, and the impact of the war on women. "The exigencies of the times did away with many conventions," Andrews observed, and her diary provides insights into the plight of Southern women during the war and Reconstruction.

Her own life exemplified how the war had indeed wiped out "many conventions." Having lost her father's substantial estate (Garnett Andrews, although a Unionist, had owned two hundred slaves), she was forced to rely on her own resources to survive, and did so by teaching and by writing novels, serial fiction for periodicals, books on botany, and articles on socialism. In 1931 Andrews died in Rome, Georgia, at the age of ninety. Convinced that for the North the Civil War had been not a moral crusade but a fight to promote the interests of capitalism, she went to her grave a Marxist.

Questions to Consider. How persuasive do you find Sherman's reasoning in his message to the Atlantans? Would his arguments justify the unlimited destruction of hostile cities? In contrast to the North, where during the war women had opportunities to work in the Sanitary Commission or the Nursing Corps, in the Confederacy there were no government-sponsored wartime organizations that employed women. They had to cope on their own. Do you think Eliza Andrews's response might have been typical? What was the specific nature of the destruction she witnessed?

Message to the Atlanta City Council (1864)

WILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN

Gentlemen: I have your letter of the 11th, in the nature of a petition to revoke my orders removing all the inhabitants from Atlanta. I have read it carefully, and give full credit to your statements of the distress that will be occasioned, and yet shall not revoke my orders, because they were not designed to meet the humanities of the case, but to prepare for the future struggles in which millions of good people outside of Atlanta have a deep interest. We must have peace, not only at Atlanta, but in all America. To secure this, we must stop the war that now desolates our once happy and favored country. To stop war, we must defeat the rebel armies which are arrayed against the laws and Constitution that all must respect and obey. To defeat those armies, we must prepare the way to reach them in their recesses, provided with the arms and instruments which enable us to accomplish our purpose. Now, I know the vindictive nature of our enemy, that we may have many years of military operations from this quarter; and, therefore, deem it wise and prudent to prepare in time. The use of Atlanta for warlike purposes is inconsistent with its character as a home for families. There will be no manufactures, commerce, or agriculture here, for the maintenance of families, and sooner or later want will compel the inhabitants to go. Why not go now, when all the arrangements are completed for the transfer, instead of waiting till the plunging shot of contending armies will renew the scenes of the past month? Of course, I do not apprehend any such thing at this moment, but you do not suppose this army will be here until the war is over. I cannot discuss this subject with you fairly, because I cannot impart to you what we propose to do, but I assert that our military plans make it necessary for the inhabitants to go away, and I can only renew my offer of services to make their exodus in any direction as easy and comfortable as possible.

You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war into our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out. I know I had no hand in making this war, and I know I will make more sacrifices to-day than any of you to secure peace. But you cannot have peace and a division of our country. If the United States submits to a division now, it will not stop, but will go on until we reap the fate of Mexico, which is eternal war. The United States does and must assert its authority, wherever it once had power; for, if it relaxes one bit to pressure, it is gone, and I believe that such is the national feeling. This feeling assumes various shapes, but always comes back to that of

William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (Appleton, New York, 1875)

A devastated land. In this painting by David English Henderson, a Virginia family returns to a home shattered by the bloody battle of Fredericksburg. Significantly, no men of military age remain. (Gettysburg National Military Park)

Union. Once admit the Union, once more acknowledge the authority of the national Government, and, instead of devoting your houses and streets and roads to the dread uses of war, I and this army become at once your protectors and supporters, shielding you from danger, let it come from what quarter it may. I know that a few individuals cannot resist a torrent of error and passion, such as swept the South into rebellion, but you can point out, so that we may know those who desire a government, and those who insist on war and its desolation.

You might as well appeal against the thunder-storm as against these terrible hardships of war. They are inevitable, and the only way the people of Atlanta can hope once more to live in peace and quiet at home, is to stop the war, which can only be done by admitting that it began in error and is perpetuated in pride.

We don't want your Negroes, or your horses, or your houses, or your lands, or any thing you have, but we do want and will have a just obedience to the laws of the United States. That we will have, and if it involves the destruction of your improvements, we cannot help it.

You have heretofore read public sentiment in your newspapers, that live by falsehood and excitement; and the quicker you seek for truth in other quarters, the better. I repeat then that, by the original compact of government, the United States had certain rights in Georgia, which have never been relinquished and never will be; that the South began war by seizing forts, arsenals, mints, custom-houses, etc., etc., long before Mr. Lincoln was installed, and before the South had one jot or tittle of provocation. I myself have seen in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi, hundreds and thousands of women and children fleeing from your armies and desperadoes, hungry and with bleeding feet. In Memphis, Vicksburg, and Mississippi, we fed thousands upon thousands of the families of rebel soldiers left on our hands, and whom we could not see starve. Now that war comes home to you, you feel very different. You deprecate its horrors, but did not feel them when you sent car-loads of soldiers and ammunition, and moulded shells and shot, to carry war into Kentucky and Tennessee, to desolate the homes of hundreds and thousands of good people who only asked to live in peace at their old homes, and under the Government of their inheritance. But these comparisons are idle. I want peace, and believe it can only be reached through union and war, and I will ever conduct war with a view to perfect an early success.

But, my dear sirs, when peace does come, you may call on me for any thing. Then will I share with you the last cracker, and watch with you to shield your homes and families against danger from every quarter.

Now you must go, and take with you the old and feeble, feed and nurse them, and build for them, in more quiet places, proper habitations to shield them against the weather until the mad passions of men cool down, and allow the Union and peace once more to settle over your old homes at Atlanta.

Diary of a Georgia Girl (1864)

ELIZA ANDREWS

December 24, 1864.—About three miles from Sparta we struck the "burnt country," as it is well named by the natives, and then I could better understand the wrath and desperation of these poor people. I almost felt as if I should like to hang a Yankee myself. There was hardly a fence left standing all the way from Sparta to Gordon. The fields were trampled down and the road was lined with carcasses of horses, hogs, and cattle that the invaders, unable either to consume or to carry away with them, had wantonly shot down, to starve out the people and prevent them from making their crops.

Eliza Andrews, *The War-Time Diary of a Georgia Girl* (Appleton, New York, 1908).

The stench in some places was unbearable; every few hundred yards we had to hold our noses or stop them with the cologne Mrs. Elzey had given us, and it proved a great boon. The dwellings that were standing all showed signs of pillage, and on every plantation we saw the charred remains of the ginhouse and packing screw, while here and there lone chimney stacks, "Sherman's sentinels," told of homes laid in ashes. The infamous wretches! I couldn't wonder now that these poor people should want to put a rope round the neck of every red-handed "devil of them" they could lay their hands on. Hayricks and fodder stacks were demolished, corncribs were empty, and every bale of cotton that could be found was burnt by the savages. I saw no grain of any sort except little patches they had spilled when feeding their horses and which there was not even a chicken left in the country to eat. A bag of oats might have lain anywhere along the road without danger from the beasts of the field, though I cannot say it would have been safe from the assaults of hungry man.

Crowds of soldiers were tramping over the road in both directions; it was like traveling through the streets of a populous town all day. They were mostly on foot, and I saw numbers seated on the roadside greedily eating raw turnips, meat skins, parched corn—anything they could find, even picking up the loose grains that Sherman's horses had left. I felt tempted to stop and empty the contents of our provision baskets into their laps, but the dreadful accounts that were given of the state of the country before us made prudence get the better of our generosity.

Before crossing the Oconee at Milledgeville we ascended an immense hill, from which there was a fine view of the town, with Governor Brown's fortifications in the foreground and the river rolling at our feet. The Yankees had burnt the bridge; so we had to cross on a ferry. There was a long train of vehicles ahead of us, and it was nearly an hour before our turn came; so we had ample time to look about us. On our left was a field where thirty thousand Yankees had camped hardly three weeks before. It was strewn with the debris they had left behind, and the poor people of the neighborhood were wandering over it, seeking for anything they could find to eat, even picking up grains of corn that were scattered around where the Yankees had fed their horses. We were told that a great many valuables were found there at first, plunder that the invaders had left behind, but the place had been picked over so often by this time that little now remained except tufts of loose cotton, piles of half-rotted grain, and the carcasses of slaughtered animals, which raised a horrible stench. Some men were plowing in one part of the field, making ready for next year's crop.