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John F. Marszalek. *Sherman's March to the Sea.* Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2005. 129 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-893114-16-6.

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Published on H-CivWar (May, 2007)

A Campaign of Moderation

In September 1864, General William T. Sherman and his Union army occupied Atlanta, Georgia. After weeks of maneuvering and marching through north Georgia then defeating the Confederate army in bloody battles on the outskirts of the city, Sherman's men had won their prize. Then something unusual in the history of warfare occurred. The opposing armies that had contended with each other for possession of the city turned and marched in opposite directions. Thus began Confederate General John Bell Hood's quest to conquer Middle Tennessee followed by Sherman's controversial decision to destroy his own line of supply and communication and march southeast to Savannah and the sea. Traditionally portrayed as a ruthless campaign of pillage, plunder, and destruction, the "March to the Sea" is remembered in Georgia as a dark page in Civil War history.

John F. Marszalek, Giles Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Mississippi State University, offers a different perspective in his latest book. *Sherman's March to the Sea* is the twenty-sixth volume in the Civil War Campaigns and Commanders series published by the McWhiney Foundation Press. This series is intended to provide the general reader with brief, authoritative, and lively accounts of important military leaders and battles in the nation's bloodiest conflict. This volume, like others in the series, provides a succinct and sharply focused assessment of the campaign that is the best short account of the topic to date. Marszalek's interpretation is in the same vein as previous studies by Joseph Glathaar and Mark Grimsley, which is to say more balanced, even sympathetic, toward Sherman and his men as he seeks to dispel old myths about rampant and wanton destruction by the Union army.

Because Georgia was the largest southern state east of the Mississippi River and the third most populous state in the entire Confederacy, Sherman understood that its subjugation would go a long way toward destroying the Rebel cause and ending the war. Marszalek astutely points out that Sherman's often forgotten Meridian Campaign a few months earlier had actually served as a dress rehearsal for his better-known March to the Sea. There, in Mississippi, the Union General first experienced the fruits of his unconventional approach. The later campaign in Georgia, however, is the one most associated with Sherman's penchant for destructive war. After convincing a reluctant General Ulysses S. Grant to let him make the march, Sherman destroyed his rail links to the north, cut his telegraph lines to ensure that he could not be recalled, and, in keeping with his perpetual distrust of the reporters, ordered a media blackout to prevent the publication of information that might be helpful to southerners. When he plunged into the countryside southeast of Atlanta on November 15 no one, not even his own troops, knew his intentions. His force of 62,000 men consisted of battle-hardened veterans divided into four corps, and Sherman skillfully concealed his first objective from Confederate officials. By dividing his force and disguising his intention to take the state capital of Milledgeville, he succeeded in causing scattered enemy units to gather and defend phantom targets like Macon.

The most significant argument in Marszalek's book has to do with Sherman's motivation for conducting a campaign of destruction, and herein the author is consistent with his 1993 biography of the general. Whereas, Union soldiers embraced the idea of destruction because of their animosity toward southerners, Marszalek argues that for Sherman the motivation was different. Resorting to this type of warfare was simply the product of

his life experiences. From his work in army logistics and his experiences as a banker and business man, Sherman held a sound understanding that "society's cohesion depended on secure patterns of supply. Disrupt such patterns, and society becomes disoriented and cannot maintain its unity" (p. 22). Thus, his destructive war was aimed at creating the kind of confusion and dislocation that would accelerate the Confederacy's demise. Furthermore, Sherman came to view the destruction of property as a more humane way to get the South to stop fighting than battles and bloodshed. Indeed, far fewer Americans died as a result of his March to the Sea because his objective was not to kill enemy soldiers but to disrupt and destroy in the enemy heartland. When Sherman arrived in Savannah in the second week of December, he positioned his army so that the Confederates could slip away with minimal bloodshed, a tactic that further illustrates his desire to limit the killing.

Marszalek is also quick to point out that the destruction wrought by the Union army was actually not as widespread and indiscriminate as it has been portrayed–or at least his men were not the sole perpetrators of the abuses that occurred. Prior to the march, Hood and his evacuating Confederate army were responsible for much of the destruction of Atlanta. Later, Confederate officials instructed Georgians to destroy property and produce to keep it out of Union hands, which they did on a large scale. Confederate agents also appropriated private property without compensation, and Rebel units under General Joseph Wheeler often plundered communities before Sherman's arrival. Those facts notwithstanding, the ruination that visited a large swath of eastern Georgia, regardless of the instigator, was quickly and inaccurately attributed to the Union army, Marszalek contends. So deeply engrained is the mythology surrounding the March to the Sea that some Georgians will never be persuaded that Sherman was not Satan incarnate. However, Marszalek's balanced approach presents a portrait of a general who used logic and a degree of moderation to help bring the bloody carnage of civil war to an end.

Sherman's March to the Sea is a brief but splendid account of this much-maligned general and his famous campaign. The author's argument is compelling and his writing is clear and crisp. The book contains two maps, twenty biographical sketches, and thirteen illustrations, and it is an excellent addition to the Campaigns and Commanders series.

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Citation: Tim Johnson. Review of Marszalek, John F., *Sherman's March to the Sea.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

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