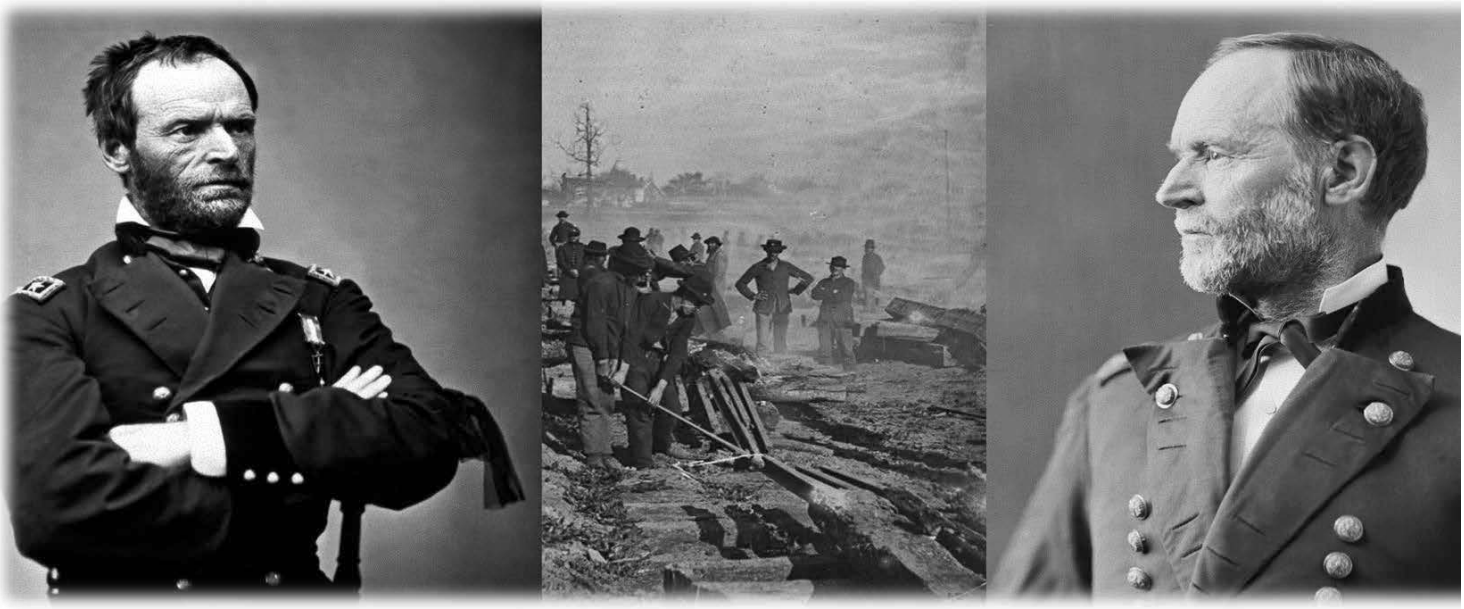

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Sherman's Bummers and the Depths of Modern War

By

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The destruction wrought by William Tecumseh Sherman's soldiers during the Civil War still inspires resentment among Southerners today. Scavenging Southern homes for crops and family valuables, U.S. soldiers foraged for supplies but also outraged civilians. Nicknamed bummers, these soldiers played an important role in influencing how we remember Sherman's march. Some paint the bummers as thieves, while others stress the necessity of their acts as well as the treachery of their victims. To the Confederate army, the bummers were not soldiers but criminals who violated the laws of war. Confederate troops even executed bummers across Georgia and South Carolina who were surrendering. Sherman believed them to be the key component to his march, as they instilled fear among the Southern people and supplied food for his men.

This work will start with an evaluation of past precedent for the laws of war in order to provide context for the bummers' actions. The history of foraging from the Roman Empire all the way up to the Napoleonic Wars will give further background to their behavior. After setting the stage with a discussion of Sherman's march, the main section of this paper will describe the life of these bummers, using firsthand accounts to help better illustrate why they were so reviled and what set of circumstances led them to forage upon the Georgian farmscape. Turning to reactions from both Southern and Northern civilians, newspapers, and politicians, these portraits of American thought will properly

showcase the wide range of opinions towards bummers.

The paper will conclude with an analysis of Sherman's justification for the use of bummers and how Francis Lieber, the writer of the landmark code for Laws of War at the time, would judge the bummers' seizing of property. When confronted with the indecent behavior of his bummers Sherman said, "They did some things they ought not to have done, yet, on the whole, they have supplied the wants of the army with as little violence as could be expected."[126] This paper will give a breadth of context to this statement and attempt to determine if Sherman was correct in his perception of the bummers. The march to the sea saw the line between foraging and pillaging blurred and brought the war right to the doorsteps of Southern civilians, lending support to the belief that great and unforgiveable injustices were committed by the bummers.

Laws of War

Before America's founding, European warfare had been fought from the view that the enemy's unjust acts were unlawful, while one's own righteous army committed illegitimate violence and pillaging out of necessity.[127] The eye of the beholder determined how the men fighting would be judged following a conflict. The ethicality behind the bloodshed played a crucial role as well and, if it was a just war, "armies could lawfully plunder the goods of the enemy and enslave them."[128] In contrast to this position, the Enlightenment era of Europe brought a new wave of thought that did not rely on a wavering definition and heavy reliance on the word necessity. This philosophy, pioneered by Emmerich de Vattel in his *Laws of Nations*, protected "women, children and feeble old men," arguing that they made "no resistance," so the state had "no right to maltreat their persons."[129] He went on to say that "the sovereign declaring war can neither detain the persons nor the property of those subjects of the enemy."[130] In less progressive and nearly contradictory statements, Vattel's new rules supported the state taking "all moveable property" or, in other words "booty," which is inherently owned by the sovereign.[131] These rules also allowed for the lawful taking of property from an unjust enemy "in order to weaken or punish him."[132] Although the Laws of War became more defined and securing of people's rights in this era, the justification needed for the boundless taking of property during wartime was being established.

The laws that govern warfare in the newly formed United States had a turbulent history similar to that of the Civil War. The founding roots of our code of war can be found in the first formal document of our nation, the Declaration of Independence of 1776. Among several sentiments, it criticized King George's acts in how he "ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the lives of our people;" behavior not associated with any "civilized nation." This laid the groundwork for the Revolutionary War, where George Washington regularly displayed the moral high ground, even handing out a copy of the Articles of War to every continental soldier, in an effort to deter abuse against civilians.[133] In one of Washington's General Orders he forbade all "plundering" done by

[126] Jospeh T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns*, (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 125.
[127] John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History*, (New York: Free Press, 2012), 17.
[128] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 17.
[129] Emmerich De Vattell, *The Law of Nations; Or, Principles of the Law of Nature Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797), 351.
[130] De Vattell, *The Law of Nations, 3*17.
[131] De Vattell, *The Law of Nations,* 365.
[132] De Vattell, *The Law of Nations,* 365.
[133] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 20.

soldiers in an attempt to "distinguish brave Americans…from mercenary ravagers, whether British or Hessians."[134] With this progress came setbacks involving unsuccessful prisoner exchanges and even executions that were antithetical to the moral reasoning of the Enlightenment era. Washington's image still remained intact, with Americans lauding his humanity throughout the conflict.[135]

In the United States' second clash with Britain, the War of 1812, the issue of property seizure in wartime came to a head. The country came into the war with Benjamin Franklin's newly envisioned standards in mind, which gave greater protections to "economically productive private property."[136] Thomas Jefferson embraced this idea because it would bring about the "softening and diminishing [of] the calamities of war" by protecting the interest of farmers' fields and homes.[137] In the Supreme Court case *Brown v. United States*, Chief Justice John Marshall brought Franklin's view closer to reality. In Marshall's majority opinion he wrote "war gives the right to confiscate, but does not itself confiscate the property of the enemy, and their rules go to the exercise of this right."[138] With this statement, he accepted that war gives armies the right to take property but as he elaborates further on, having Congress give a declaration of war did not automatically allow such confiscation. Following the War of 1812, legal scholar James Kent wrote in his book *Commentaries on American Law* that the civilized and modern way of war was one in which soldiers were "not to touch private property on land, without making compensation."[139] The decision in *Brown* was not as strong a declaratory ruling as many might have hoped, but it was the beginning of a legally enforced idea that restricted the concept of the unregulated taking of the spoils of war.

History of Foraging in Wartime

The origins of scavenging for supplies during times of war can be traced back hundreds of years before the Civil War, which reflects how advancement and change in this area of military strategy had been limited, if not nonexistent. For the Roman Empire to expand its borders to the degree to which it did, it necessitated an expansive supply system which involved strategically placed stockpiles of food along an army's route and occasional relief from ships when a harbor was close by.[140] Some grain and meat was provided by the surrounding communities, who were "indemnified by the imperial treasury" for their service.[141] When this level of planning could not be feasibly accomplished in enemy territory, the act of foraging became key. Taking from the land became important not only to enrich the Roman army's supply but also to hurt the enemy's. Having a military campaign's foundation built on foraging was far too risky for the Romans because it meant stripping the land of all its resources, limiting long-term military offensives. This method was to be used sparingly and only when necessary.

Jumping forward several hundred years to the first conflict the young country of the United States faced, the American Revolution's guerilla style warfare resulted in desperate British forces and an inexperienced Continental Army having to resort to foraging. Entering the war, Britain was depended on their prior history of living off the land in the French and Indian War in order

[134] George Washington, General Orders (Trenton, NJ: *National Archives*, January 1, 1777)
[135] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 26.
[136] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 70.
[137] Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Thomas Jefferson: Westward the Course of Empire* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999), 213.
[138] Brown v. United States (1814).
[139] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 71.
[140] Paul Erdkamp, *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 328.
[141] Erdkamp, *A Companion to the Roman Army*, 326.

to feed and supply their forces, but they overestimated the generosity of Americans.[142] The loyalist assistance was not as bountiful as they had hoped. Another factor that pushed the British to forage, and ultimately lose the war, was the significant amount of time it took to ship items across the Atlantic and the inconsistent travel times for vessels carrying supplies.[143] The defending army also employed scavenging tactics, as shown in Samuel Downing's memories of foraging during his time as a Continental Army soldier. When speaking about the men in his regiment he recounts, "The rest had been out foraging. One had stolen a hive of honey; some others had brought in eight quarters of good mutton, and others, apples and garden sauce."[144] This shows how the foraging adventures were done mainly to quench one's hunger, with a few niceties thrown in. What differentiated this era from the Civil War was that the colonial soldiers were foraging for food in their home country, while several decades later the same was being done in an enemy territory where items taken were not for survival but for personal wealth.

At the turn of the century, the Napoleonic War demonstrated the usefulness and danger of foraging tactics in a new era of warfare. Britain typically discouraged their armies to live off the land, except in the American Revolution when the direness of the situation forced officers to overlook the deviations from their military code. In contrast, the French armies liberally foraged when invading territories, often relying on the practice to sustain their army with no contingency plan. When successful, foraging "decreased an army's dependency on magazines and convoys which improved the army's overall mobility."[145] This was not always the case, as when Napoleon's army started their campaign in Egypt. Many of the 55,000-man army threw away their biscuits, expecting to find plentiful food and water during their invasion. This approach backfired, with many soldiers losing their lives and even resorting to taking their own because of the starvation and heat of the desert.[146] The situation was just as dismal in Russia, where French foot soldier Jakob Walter described in his diary that, "when there was nothing to be found, they could hunt up cabbage stalks here and there from under the snow...and let the core slowly thaw out in their mouths."[147] This experience of searching for food in the frozen wasteland and of the dry desert in Northern Africa illustrates the limits of foraging and the obvious drawbacks to the process.

Sherman's March

The march of General William Tecumseh Sherman's troops through the South can be seen as a defining moment of military strategy that sent shockwaves throughout the country for its daring and innovative campaign. Others, such as the General himself, saw it as "a means to an end, and not as an essential act of war," playing down the accomplishment by saying he "simply moved from Atlanta to Savannah."[148] As the commander of the Western Forces of the Union

[142] John A. Takor, "Logistics and the British Defeat in the Revolutionary War," (Sept. 1999).

[143] John A. Takor, "Logistics and the British Defeat in the Revolutionary War," (Sept. 1999). .

[144] Merril D. Smith, *The World of the American Revolution: A Daily Life Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2015), 856.

[145] Norman L. Durham, *The Command and Control of the Grand Armee: Napoleon as Organizational Designer* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2009), 7:

[146] Nina Martyris, "Appetite For War: What Napoleon And His Men Ate On The March," *National Public Radio* (June 18, 2010).

[147] Walter, Jakob, and Marc Raeff. *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 63.

[148] William Tecumseh Sherman. *The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, Volume II*, (New York: Literary Classics of America, 1990), 697.

Army, General Sherman was tasked with seizing the city of Atlanta in the summer of 1864. The primary reason it was targeted was to dismantle the transportation and railroad hub which provided a base for dispersing supplies throughout the Confederate States.

After Sherman burned down Atlanta, his army sat waiting for new orders and purpose. Sherman's plan consisted of a mass movement of troops through the southern heartland as a strong show of force to the Southern people. In a letter to General Grant, Sherman wrote about how this would affect Jefferson Davis' Confederate country; "If we can march a well-appointed army right through his territory, it is a demonstration to the world, foreign and domestic, that we have a power which Davis cannot resist...proof positive that the North can prevail."[149] It was to be a prolonged expedition, equal parts psychological and physical. The main goal, as he outlined, was to "cut the confederacy in two, and come up the rear of Lee."[150] In his preparations, Sherman used livestock and crop production from statistics in the 1860 census, interlaid with a Department of the Interior map showing Georgia counties, in figuring out where his army would pass through.[151] The march was a premeditated and calculated event intended to hurt the Southern war effort, while also giving the Union soldiers great prospects for survival in enemy territory.

The logistics surrounding the march reveal the radical and methodical approach Sherman and his subordinates were undertaking. The Savannah campaign, as many called it, was divided into two columns covering two distinct areas of the land between Georgia's most populous cities; Atlanta and Savannah. This was designed to avoid any traffic generally seen in single pronged troop movements and to "broaden not only the foraging area but also the swath of destruction."[152] Sherman's regiments were isolated from Union supply routes, and telegraph wires were cut in his wake making his movements unpredictable. Sherman hoped that, "Instead of my guessing at what he means to do, he will have to guess at my plans."[153] Part of the motivation for these fierce and destructive tactics was fueled by revenge, as Sherman said, "since they have been doing so much to destroy us and our government we have to destroy them."[154] The small Confederate Army in Georgia employed many tactics to stop this passionate force encroaching on their territory, such as planting mines, burning provisions, and destroying bridges, but this accomplished little.[155] Along the way the Union army created chaos by welcoming newly freed slaves into the march, twisting railroad lines into trees, burning towns to the ground, and terrorizing the locals.

Sherman's glorious march to the sea ended with his taking of Savannah. Before moving his troops North through the Carolinas to further punish the South for their traitorous exit from the Union, Sherman telegraphed President Abraham Lincoln, informing him of the gift of Savannah he had just secured. The Northern Newspapers celebrated the great victory; *The New York Times* wrote, "The campaign will stand as one of the most striking feats in military history, and will prove one of the heaviest blows

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[149] Shelby Foote, *The Civil War; a Narrative, Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Random House, 1974), 623.

[150] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 808.

[151] Noah Andre Trudeau, *Southern Storm: Sherman's March to the Sea* (New York, NY: Harper, 2008), 52.

[152] Foote, *The Civil War; a Narrative,* 642.

[153] Robert B. Mitchell, "Sherman's March to the Sea," *America's Civil War* (December 9, 2015)

[154] Robert B. Mitchell, "Sherman's March to the Sea"

[155] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom,* 809.

at the vitality of the great Southern rebellion."[156] The march through Georgia lasted from mid-November to December 21st, barely over a month. The widespread wreckage and havoc it caused on the Southern landscape was apparent in early 1865, but its effect on the morale of Southerners could only truly be seen many years after the march, when diaries and memoirs documented the horrors of this traumatic event.

Bummers

The life of a bummer was fraught with both risks and opportunity. In order to sustain the revolutionary military strategy that Sherman endeavored to accomplish, he could not maintain any supply lines to his constantly moving army. He was without any source of supplies marching to Savannah 200 miles away, "like a trapeze artist flying from one bar to another."[157] The only avenue through which to get food, medicine, and crops was to take them from the surrounding lands. Foragers were given the responsibility of searching the neighboring towns and properties for supplies and, if they were lucky, valuable items such as jewelry and silver.[158] The bummers would return back to camp at night lauded as heroes with "strings of chickens dangling from the saddle, pigs, bacon....mostly food confiscated from the hapless citizens."[159] Sherman encouraged his men to "forage liberally on the country" and, when writing to army chief of staff General Hallack about his foragers taking the crops and livestock of rich planters, he said Southerners "will have something more than a mean opinion of the 'Yanks.'" Sherman did not just want to destroy the Southern army and its resources but also to demoralize its people.

General Sherman believed that his march was unique in the history of armed conflict, a version of total war on a modern scale never seen before. As he articulated, "We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war."[160] The obtrusive entrance of the foragers into the lives of Southerners began early in the morning when groups of twenty to thirty men were sent out, mostly on horses that were stolen in previous days of the march.[161] This allowed for a mobile force that could sweep across the Southern countryside and escape trouble quickly if it stumbled upon Confederate troops. There were certain restrictions in place to limit the foragers unlawfully taking advantage of the Southern people, such as laws against entering the dwellings of inhabitants and leaving enough food for the Southern families to sustain themselves, but these were rarely heeded. Instead, bummers took all that was in sight with little to no regard for what was in the best interests of the original owner. In Georgia alone, 10.4 million pounds of grain and more than 20,000 cattle, mules, and horses were taken from the Southern people.[162] This disregard for human life can be seen in Major Lewis Warner's illustration of the effects of bummers; "I have seen families of helpless women and children completely stripped of everything which could afford food for their larders."[163]

The common illustration of a bummer was similar to any typical Union soldier, but described as more scowling, mysterious, and strange, alluding to their criminal history of confiscating the possessions and livelihood of the Southern people. An 1866 magazine article

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[156] "The Close of Sherman's Great Campaign Savannah Ours," *New York Times* (December 26, 1864).

[157] Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 175.

[158] David Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1986), 54.

[159] Mark H. Dunkelman, "Death to All Foragers," *American History* (August 2002): 30.

[160] Dunkelman, "Death to All Foragers," 31.

[161] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea*, 53.

[162] Dunkelman, "Death to All Foragers," 35.

[163] Dunkelman, "Death to All Foragers," 31.

portrayed the bummers as, "a motley crew...rough and rugged from their long campaign, some in blue uniforms, some in rebel gray."[164] The bummers were usually stragglers from the infantry, thrust into a position of greater importance by lack of morals and Sherman's daring plans.[165] A select few would wear the clothes they had scavenged, going so far as to wear an entire 'Southern belle' outfit.[166] Bummers were also seen coming back from foraging expeditions in full Revolutionary War uniforms that veterans had saved for half a century.[167] One Sherman officer's interpretation was that the bummer was a "ragged man, blackened by the smoke of many pine knot fire, mounted on a scrawny mule."[168] Some were even "barefooted," and one newspaperman wrote that they appeared to be "possessed by a spirit," showing just how unique and peculiar the bummers were.[169] [170] The scavengers rode with reckless abandon, most without saddles on their horses, pushing their beasts to the absolute limit by going at full speed in order to wreak havoc on as many homes as possible in one raid. The writer of the magazine article compared the bummer to "a spoiled child" who will take anything and everything in their path, whether it would help the Union cause or not.[171] The act of scavenging became less of a necessity in order to supply the army with food, and instead became a competition with other foraging parties; the game based on the idea of first come, first served.

Although foraging became popularized in Sherman's march mainly because an army of that size, 60,000 men, had never sustained itself off the land for such a long period of time, it was actually a common practice before the campaign to Savannah. When rations were low, soldiers had no other choice but to look for their meals elsewhere. Foraging was technically illegal, but officers looked the other way because of the tasty benefits that came back to camp on scavenging raids. Nothing dramatically changed when Sherman made foraging legal except that the foragers had formal approval from their superiors. As one Michigan man said about the recent order making foraging legal, "The fiction of respecting property rights of citizens was no longer maintained."[172] This shift in legal principles, legitimizing near-pillaging, defined the march and what made it a success.

The main purpose for foraging parties, when they were not searching for hidden valuables, was food and livestock. Capturing smaller farm animals was occasionally a tough task, as bummers were encouraged not to use their live rounds to take down their innocent prey.[173] These war hardened and "rough looking set of soldiers" were forced to chase and tackle pigs, chickens, geese, and turkeys around a plantation, offering a vaudevillian act in the process.[174] Of all the provisions to be found out in the Southern heartland, honey was the most desired among the men. It was a risk to obtain it, but some of the spryer and lighter-footed bummers simply stuck their bayonets into hives and sprinted as fast as they could hoping to outrun the bees on their trail. After looting one of these hives, an Illinois private said, "We had

[164] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly, a Magazine of Today* (May 1866): 2.

[165] Henry O. Marcy, *Sherman's Campaign in the Carolinas* (Boston, MA: Commandery of the State of Massachusetts, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1900), 340.

[166] John Gilchrist Barrett, *Sherman's March through the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 55.

[167] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea*, 54.

[168] John F. Marszalek, *Sherman's March to the Sea* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2005), 70.

[169] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*., 122.

[170] Barrett, *Sherman's March through the Carolinas*, 55.

[171] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly*, 4.

[172] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 120.

[173] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 124.

[174] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 123.

a sweet time and some swelled eyes besides."[175] These stories of the bummers' silly antics were used to distract the Northerners and sway the public's perception of these men.

The bummers, with no other demographic to forage from, targeted the Georgia whites to vandalize. Charles Ewing, an Ohio soldier who bore witness to the bummers taking advantage of the Southern people, said that "when we pass through there was but little left for rebel troops to live on." In his letters to his father he also spoke of the greedy intentions of the scavengers, "If money, watches or jewelry was found it was inevitably confiscated."[176] The Buffalo Tribune published a story following the war titled "The Doings of Sherman's Bummers." The article details an interaction between a group of twenty bummers and a woman alone in her house while her husband was fighting in General Lee's army. After barging into her home, stealing all her chickens, and singing The Star Spangled Banner in her parlor, they "inquired about the silver plate." She begged and wept, pleading them to not take the silver. After strapping her silver goblet to his knapsack one of the bummers said, "Madam, war is a dreadful thing," and then said his goodbye.[177] There are hundreds of stories just like these and they all tell a similar story of depravity and desperation.

From the opposite perspective, many letters and diaries from this month-long campaign exist that recount the trials and tribulations bummers faced while making their rounds. The personal narrative, *Recollections of a Bummer* by Major Charles E. Belknap, attests this struggle. It took approximately two or three days to collect his load before returning to the march from, sometimes, fifty miles away. When tasked with foraging he was told, "everything on foot and wing, all things of the earth and air, were 'contraband of war'"[178] Although there were benefits to his position, it was a dangerous business. As he remembers, one soldier who strayed too far from the group was met with an overwhelming Confederate force that "gave him a volley, four bullets hitting him; then a trooper gave him a cut on the head." Other stragglers were even less fortunate, as Belknap describes, one lieutenant had "a trail rope about his neck" and was pulled "up over the limb of a roadside tree."[179] From his memoir, it is evident that the major was not one of the more outwardly criminal bummers in Sherman's army, having never assaulted Southern civilians or stolen their most precious items, but there were many crazed and savage men who took up this duty recklessly.

Tensions ran high and violent outbursts fueled by rage were frequent occurrences among the bummers. This attitude may have been more prevalent among these men than the soldiers on the front lines since bummers were met face-to-face with their enemy, while their counterparts on the battlefield only saw a sea of gray when facing opposition. Being in the homes of possible traitors only fostered greater hatred toward the rebel cause. The Southerners had to face such anger whether they were sympathetic to the Confederacy or not. As one officer recounted, a bummer "came away with a feeling of hardness towards the Southern Confederacy he had never felt before."[180] An example of this brutality can be seen in foragers who would seek out dogs on plantations and kill them, simply out of suspicion that they were used as bloodhounds to track down runaway slaves.[181] Bummers would enter the smokehouses and barns of residents, killing livestock on a whim when their wagons were full and could not carry

[175] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 124.
[176] Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 197.
[177] "The Doings of Sherman's Bummers," *Buffalo Daily Courier*, 5/22/1867.
[178] Charles E. Belknap, (1898), 3.
[179] Belknap, *Recollections of a Bummer*, 12.
[180] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea,* 68.
[181] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly,* 6.

anything else.[182] Given this type of freedom to pillage the countryside, men did what might be expected of them. Having been constricted to the monotony of marching and facing bitter defeats and pointless victories, how joyous it must have been to break free from those shackles and express their true disdain for the Southern people. The bummers themselves are partly to blame, but it is largely General Sherman's burden to bare for the destruction and robbery of the Confederate populace, for it was he who suggested they forage liberally on the land.

While this characterization might make the foragers seem like ruthless, autonomous, and daring men, they were not a brave group of soldiers. Although there were definite signs of reckless activity, there was also a lack of bravery as shown in the magazine article from Beadle's Monthly, when "the enemy is in any respect of equal force, discretion leads our bummers to leave so unpleasantly a locality..."[183] This demonstrates the cowardice that most foragers displayed on their raids. Their valor and determination only lasted as long as the reward was great enough. If they were being run down by approaching Confederates, they would drop any food they had in order to escape their pursuers, leaving their fellow soldiers hungry for another day. Bummers were antithetical to the basic tenets of soldiers who fight in war, illustrating the lack of fearlessness and honor among them. While their self-interest was their own, General Sherman was the individual who provoked such behavior and allowed their actions to taint the accomplishments of his march through the South.

Southern Reaction

The plight that many Southerners faced at the hands of bummers is well documented and shows just how contradictory their actions were to the moral standards placed on soldiers during wartime. Foragers typically targeted plantations where the loot gathered had a higher chance of being worth the trip. When Federal troops invaded her large plantation, Dolly Burge described their entrance; "But like demons they rushed in! To my smoke-house, my dairy, pantry, kitchen and cellar, like famished wolves they come, breaking locks and whatever is in their way."[184] In her diary, Burge goes on to detail how her livestock was "shot down in my yard and hunted as though they were rebels themselves."[185] Other descriptions of similarly chaotic events say that in seconds, one's home became completely ransacked and they would "invade your most private apartment."[186] Lieutenant Thomas Taylor recounted an example of men in Union garb entering a home in Georgia, "and after robbing the family" they completed "their inhuman and fiendish act...by driving the lady big with child, her innocent children and her aged mother from the house."[187] Accounts like these show how pillaging of Southerners was widespread and not were just Southerners embellishing encounters with federal troops.

Another famous account of the bummers' relentless seizure of every belonging their Southern victims owned comes from May Jones Mallard, a clergyman's daughter, who described what happened when manic foragers entered her home. "We heard the clash of arms and noise of horsemen... forty or fifty men [were] in the pantry...[they] flew around the house, tearing open boxes. It was impossible to utter a

[182] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea*, 54.
[183] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly,* 7.
[184] Dolly Sumner Lunt and Christine Jacobson Carter, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879*.(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 159.
[185] Lunt, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 160.*
[186] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly,* 4.
[187] Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 193.

word, for© we were completely paralyzed by the fury of the mob."[188] Dolly Burge's, Lieutenant Taylor's, and Ms. Mallard's depictions of foragers give support to the idea that these bummers had crossed a significant line in the standards of war. Confiscating the property of uninvolved women and children, who most likely were innocent parties to the war that surrounded them, was inexcusable behavior.

Northern men were not the only soldiers who foraged off the land when Sherman's march created a lawless environment where acts paramount to pillaging were allowed. While many Northerners preferred to view the Southern people as one massive group that all voted for secession, there were many Georgians who remained loyal citizens to the Union. These numerous Georgian Unionists, along with post Emancipation Proclamation blacks, used this opportunity to seek revenge upon the rebel traitors and their former owners. Even greedy Confederates who had given up on the cause joined in the foraging being carried out against their fellow Southerners, gaining a reputation of being worse than the Union boys. The Southern newspaper, *Charleston Courier*, printed the letters of a Confederate soldier reinforcing this sentiment; "I do not think the Yankees are any worse than our own army...[they] steal and plunder indiscriminately regardless of sex."[189] Following the campaign, one citizen wrote to a Confederate States of America secretary complaining about the "destructive lawlessness of members" of Confederate General Wheeler's command. This concerned citizen went on to say, "It is no unusual sight to see these men ride late into camp with all sorts of plunder."[190] While Federal soldiers made up the majority of bummers, some Southerners also decided to partake in the foraging, making the South's interpretation of the march a little more complex.

With no other choice, the Southern people attempted to peacefully fight back their invaders on a house by house basis. To prevent bummers from stealing everything on their property, families would bury the most crucial food for their survival and priceless family heirlooms in their garden. The bummers soon caught on and gained a heightened perceptivity to any freshly turned earth. The soldiers also used ramrods and bayonets as a form of a 19th century metal detector to search for items buried deep within the ground.[191] Some Southerners even hid their valuables in fake burial sites, trusting that the bummers would honor this scared ground and not stoop so low as to commit grave robbery.[192] Knowing that foragers would dig up the ground surrounding a grave stone, Southerners placed bombs in these coffins, with one instance of a wooden box blinding four Indiana men when its contents exploded.[193] Others stood up to the invading force with their words, as an Iowa solider remembers one bold woman saying to incoming Federal troops, "You can kill us, but you can't conquer us."[194] This remark and the nonverbal resistance that these 'rebels' displayed symbolizes the Southerner's proud defiance towards foragers, even as these home invaders violated every principle of ownership, neutrality, and privacy of innocent citizens in the South.

Northern Response

An important fact to be aware of when analyzing Northern reaction to the bummers is that, during Sherman's march through Georgia and the following campaign in the Carolinas, no soldier in his army "was ever brought to trial for unauthorized foraging."[195] No soldier would

[188] R. Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life before Emancipation* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1892), 221.
[189] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom,* 810.
[190] Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 375.
[191] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea*, 54.
[192] "Bummers in Sherman's Army," *Beadle's Monthly,* 6.
[193] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 124.
[194] Nevin, *Sherman's March: Atlanta to the Sea*, 56.
[195] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 129.

report any abuses committed by the bummers because they reaped the benefits of their exploits in the field. Among the men, it was seen as a necessity to survive and, they thought it better the Union Army have the food than the rebels. As one Michigan private argued in a letter back home, "You seem to think that our foraging...does not speak well for our morals. I think if your stomach was crying for bread, you would not think of morals or names." Even more harshly explained was another private writing to his wife who said, "I don't know what the wemon and children is going to do for something to eat, but I don't know as I care if they nevver see eny more to eat."[196] If any major backlash was to escalate against the bummers it would have needed to start from the source, and most of their fellow boys in blue were not about to ruin their only supply of sustenance.

Even though knowledge of the bummers' nefarious exploits spread throughout the states, the public perception in the North was one of condonation and acceptance. This opinion can be traced back to the origin of their nickname. In Sherman's right wing during his march through Georgia, Dr. Edward A. Duncan commented on the foragers causing a delay in the crossing of the Oconee River. He exclaimed, "Damn the bummers they are always bumming around when they are not wanted."[197] The name stuck from that moment on. Foragers were perceived as harmless, weak-willed, and independent scavengers, not participating in the real fighting, but just 'bumming around.' The joyful and innocent nature of the name made it more difficult to believe that such awful atrocities could be committed by these men. This dichotomy is expressed by a solider in the Fourteenth Corps, "The typical bummer was a character full of good humor...but with a soul sternly set upon the duty of despoiling the country."[198]

This inherent bias among the Northern people can be seen in newspapers from the time. *The Iowa Hawkeye*, a Northern newspaper, published a story on foragers mere weeks after Savannah fell that gives heroic and inspiring nicknames to the bummers including "'Smokehouse Rangers' and 'Do-Boys.'" When describing the bummer's scavenging habits the paper said, "He never objects to gold watches or silver plate 'if he can find them in a swamp a mile away from any house.'"[199] We know now, from reading testimony from Southerners, that two of the main incentivizing factors for foragers were the gold and silver. They would not distance themselves from a property before looking for prized possessions; rather they would force themselves into homes and dig through an entire yard just to find those precious valuables.

Other newspapers had this same attitude when they purposefully omitted the less favorable actions of foragers. *The Corning Journal* of New York printed a story on the bummers, detailing their heroics of "attacking a company of rebel cavalry," while not once mentioning all the personal belongings they searched for and stole.[200] Newspapers would only speak poorly of Sherman and his foragers when there was a political motive involved, not for journalistic integrity or to inform their readers. *The Hornellsville Tribune*, when promoting General Grant for President, called Sherman the "prince of a band of bummers, thieves, vagabonds and ruffians."[201]

The inoffensive portrayal of bummers carried through to the post-war period when Sherman's march was romanticized by Union politicians. These lawmakers blatantly ignored the

[196] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 133.
[197] Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 265.
[198] Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 266.
[199] "The Desolation of War—Foragers and Foraging," *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye*, 3/25/1865, 2.
[200] "Sherman's Bummers," *Corning Journal*, 4/27/1865.
[201] "Not Their Man." *The Hornellsville Tribune*, 12/19/1867.

bummers' actions or painted a picture of them as "carefree warrior[s]" who outsmarted the Southerners in their scavenging and persevered through great struggles. The passage of time also did not help the proper remembrance of hardships imposed by bummers, as participants later writing about the march discussed the bummers with little detail, and some men told tales of the foragers in a humorous light.[202]

Justification and Law Surrounding Bummers

Historians, as well as general citizens, remark on the march to the sea by weighing its effectiveness in destroying Southern confidence versus the legal and moral implications of its effects. Civil War historian Stephen Davis cites that Sherman "stands accused of four counts of war crimes" showing his obvious guilt. Davis also references the plundering and abuse of private property that was common among Sherman's campaign. John F. Marszalek, a distinguished professor at Mississippi State University, argues that "a hefty percentage" of this property damage and thievery was "caused by Confederate and Federal deserters, fugitive slaves and unscrupulous civilians." Using the small 4,000 person death toll for the march, Marszalek paints Sherman as an "American pioneer of modern war" and a humanitarian trying to save lives in the long run instead of the brute that many historians, such as Davis, portray him as.[203]

A different approach of argument comes from W. Todd Groce, the President of the Georgia Historical society. Groce admits that, from a 21st century perspective, the march looks like "a dramatic departure from earlier methods," leading many historians to classify it as the beginning of "modern total war." But when compared side-by-side with the atrocities of World War II, Sherman's deliberate targeting of foodstuffs and military property was a far cry from the mass killing of civilians seen only a few decades later. Indeed, private homes were ransacked and "civilians were stripped of more food than the army needed," but it was all for the purpose of protecting the Union and its people.[204]

Sherman entered the Civil War with the viewpoint that the entire population of the South was his enemy. He believed that, "people who would persevere in war beyond a certain limit ought to know the consequence."[205] From this position it was easier to enforce military tactics involving foragers which targeted civilians and their property.[206] Sherman was also a firm believer in trying to end war as quickly as possible, even if that meant more suffering and destruction. Shortly after the march he said, "The more awful you can make war the sooner it will be over."[207] We can hope that Sherman internally believed that his march and foraging would be conducted in a disciplined and restrained manner, but his previously held opinion on Southerners and his preferred technique for warfare did not support this sentiment and leaves him vulnerable to major criticism.

In analyzing the motivations of Sherman when issuing the order to forage liberally, a great deal of insight can be garnered from his communication with General Wade Hampton of the Confederate army. The murdering of foragers in South Carolina in 1865 and the response that Sherman gave of killing Confederate prisoners of war sparked these confrontational letters. The thought of ending the practice of foraging baffled Sherman because, as he says, "it is a war right as old as

[202] Trudeau, *Southern Storm,* 536.

[203] David Ibata, "Was General Sherman a War Criminal?," *Atlanta Forward*, 6/13,/2014.

[204] W. Todd. Groce, "Rethinking Sherman's March," *The New York Times*, 11/17,/2014.

[205] Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 172.

[206] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 276.

[207] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 279.

history." Sherman also argues that he has no other choice because there are no "civil authorities that can respond...[for] provisions." Hampton's reply does not attack this right to forage, but instead refers to an older right, "the right that every man has to defend his home." Hampton also directs Sherman's attention to when he set "fire [to] the dwelling-houses of citizens, after robbing them," harshly questioning his vague use of the term 'war rights' when justifying the use of bummers. This correspondence opens a window into Sherman's reasoning which futilely justified his pillaging with outdated rights of war that do not translate to the modern rules of armed conflict. [208]

The wartime political environment which developed at the start of the Civil War was a major factor in making Sherman's march seem acceptable at the time. The U.S. government began the war with an optimistic and progressive outlook towards the rights bestowed upon enemy civilians. By 1863 this mood had changed as 'hard war' became popularized. 'Hard war' was the term used to describe a set of policies that established how soldiers interacted with civilians towards the latter part of the war.[209] The army was becoming more vengeful and wanted to punish the South and its people for rebelling against the government. Many in the North argued that the Union could treat rebels as "disloyal citizens and international enemies."[210] Southerners were now not seen as a people under a protective shell, but rather a group upon which war and all its devastation would be imparted, giving Sherman the latitude to embark on his march.

A new standard for the Laws of War was produced by Francis Lieber in 1863, establishing rules which, almost predictively, significantly apply to the common characteristics of General Sherman's campaign, even though he made every attempt to ignore them. As the environment of modern war began changing towards "sprawling and disorganized wars," Lieber knew that the Laws of War needed some restructuring.[211] Lieber's Code, as it has hence been referred to, explicitly states, "The United States acknowledge and protect, in hostile countries occupied by them...strictly private property; the persons of the inhabitants, especially those of women...offenses to the contrary shall be rigorously punished."[212] It was certainly a progressive measure that on the surface does not speak well for Sherman's actions, but the words purposefully ignore the issue of confiscating property of citizens from an enemy's country, giving a glimmer of credibility to the strategies imposed in Georgia.

Article 38 of Lieber's code also reflects on the march to the sea as it says, "private property...can be seized only by way of military necessity."[213] Lieber's code fell into the same mistake as previous Laws of War in traditional Europe concerning the word 'necessity.' This term is key here for Sherman and also for historians judging the validity of the bummers' takings. Fortunately, Lieber gives this definition:

> Military necessity, as understood by modern civilized nations, consists in the necessity of those measures which are indispensable for securing the ends of the

[208] "Sherman and Wade Hampton," *St. Lawrence Republican,* 3/21/1865.

[209] Robert Christopher Welch, "Forage Liberally: The Role of Agriculture in Sherman' s March to the Sea" 2011. Graduate Theses and Dissertations. Paper 10372. 45.

[210] Daniel W Hamilton, *The Limits of Sovereignty: Property Confiscation in the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32.

[211] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 194.

[212] Francis Lieber, *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1863) art. 37.

[213] Francis Lieber, *Instructions for the Government*, art. 38.

> war, and which are lawful according to the modern law and usages of war.[214]

Even with this summarization, the concept of a necessity during wartime is unclear. It is clear from testimony of soldiers in the march that they would have starved if it were not for foraging. As one Illinois private said, "We were told in no uncertain terms that henceforth we must live off the country or go hungry. We did both."[215] But what placed Sherman's men into this urgency in acquiring food was the general's ambitious, albeit ill-advised, mission. It was not *necessary* for his 60,000-man army to tear through the South burning homes and stealing livestock. Sherman could have taken his force on a more direct route through the Carolinas in order to put more pressure on Lee from the South. If he had failed in his march, it would have gone down as one of the worst blunders in military history and his actions, all for naught, would have been looked upon with even more sharp criticism. The march and the bummers look to have helped the Union war effort only in hindsight.

Lieber knew Sherman's typical military approach and was concerned watching the march unfold before him. Not only was he worried about the intense fury towards the Southern people that Sherman would hold throughout the campaign, but also about the disorganized strategy that could easily become unruly without a stern hand.[216] Sherman gave a tremendous amount of freedom and responsibility to individual bummers while trusting that they would avoid any misbehavior. However, it was not uncommon for many men in Sherman's march to have a rebellious and nonconformist attitude. Major Henry Hitchcock described one incident where a drunken soldier insultingly cursed out his General as he rode by encampments on his horse. This "laxity in the ranks" and a lack of discipline laid the foundation for an environment that did not harshly punish actions which broke military standards of the time and Sherman's own rules of foraging.[217] Even one of his own officers said in his diary, "I am bound to say that I think Sherman lacking in enforcing discipline."[218] Foraging may have opened the door for several other moral controversies such as "ruthless burning, killing" and rape which, as Lieber argued, "demoralizes an army."[219] The combination of decentralized foraging and limited chastisement that should have led to a catastrophic failure, instead gave rise to severe injustices towards Southerners and deep apprehensions from Lieber, the expert on warfare conduct of the time.

Conclusion

In reviewing the march to the sea, the similarities between that famous campaign and other military engagements, which also utilized foraging methods, show the normalcy of Sherman's plan. Referring back to *Laws of Nations*, Vattel most likely would have allowed Sherman to conduct the mass foraging of the Georgian civilians, but with the thought that his course of action was a step in the wrong direction and harkened back to a less enlightened time. James Kent, the author of *Commentaries on American Law*, would be disappointed with the lack of compensation given to Southerners whose entire livelihood was stolen from them. At the same time that Lieber's code advised soldiers to behave with more benevolence, it was too vague a document to impart real limits on the Generals of the Civil War. Also, Lieber did not outright condemn activity that the bummers took part in during the march. It did include this powerful sentence, "The more vigorously wars are pursued the

[214] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 235.
[215] Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 119.
[216] Witt, *Lincoln's Code,* 280.
[217] Robert B. Mitchell, "Sherman's March to the Sea".
[218] Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 191.
[219] Witt, *Lincoln's Code*, 280.

better it is for humanity." [220] A historian could be forgiven for thinking that statement was uttered by Sherman himself.

The most significant information to apply when using Lieber's code to attack the march is the choice of the word 'necessity' and the fact that Lieber had doubts about Sherman's lack of control over his bummers. Are these enough to denounce Sherman? Is the fact that the premier thinker on wartime policy had concerns about Sherman's strategies sufficient evidence to call him a war criminal? The issue of Sherman's guilt or innocence is a complicated topic to say the least. What can be confirmed is that the bummers were thrust out into the Southern heartland with nothing but their musket and their impassioned disposition towards the Southern people in order to supply the march in ways that would not utterly destroy the Southern people, but instead damage their spirit.

Many see Sherman's march as a necessary evil of the Civil War, a significant capper to a gruesome and deadly conflict that squashed any hope of victory among the Southern people. Opposite with this opinion is outright resentment towards Sherman. He is despised by Southerners to this day for actions which were, from their point of view, carried out when the war was all but lost and meant to destroy the Georgian economy and society irreparably. The term 'War of Northern Aggression' owes some of its popularity to the ruin Georgia was left in by Sherman's foragers. While it is easy to look at the bummers as a ragtag bunch of scoundrels who cleverly took advantage of the wartime environment which surrounded them, they were more devious than that. They were criminals. Their more unlawful activity included stealing precious silver, throwing civilians out of their homes, and robbing Confederates of their money, all of which held no value for the other men in the march. These offenses seem to have accomplished little in winning the war, let alone sustaining the march, so from a military and moral perspective, the bummers are a permanent blemish on the Union's history in the Civil War.

[220] Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 151.

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