Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War

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Review

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Carr, Matthew *Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War*. The New Press, \$26.95 ISBN 9781595589552

Evaluating Sherman's Influence on Modern American Warfare

Matthew Carr's *Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War* examines William Tecumseh Sherman's destructive military career and its supposed influence on post-Civil War American warfare. A journalist who has written critically of war for years, Carr analyzes Sherman's military career, focusing on the destruction wrought on civilians. He argues that Sherman's "hard war" fostered America's twentieth century embrace of total war. Carr is advancing an old argument, primarily identified with Sherman biographer Liddell Hart, which is occasionally plausible but frequently doubtful.

Carr's stated objective is to develop a better understanding of William Tecumseh Sherman's military action and its influence on subsequent American wars. Yet Carr has little new to say about Sherman, a defect admitted in the introduction (pg. 7). The first half of the book synthesizes the secondary literature into a narrative of Sherman's military career from the Civil War through his harsh policy towards Native Americans as General of the U.S. Army. Carr emphasizes the destruction wrought by Sherman on non-combatants. Though Sherman's oft-repeated quips on the cruelty and hellishness of war suggest otherwise, the general clearly believed in limiting war's lethality, evidenced by his targeting of property rather than civilian lives. Carr points to Sherman's indiscriminate attacks on Native Americans as a precursor to later American attacks on non-combatants, but King Philip's War, George Washington, and Andrew Jackson already demonstrated America's willingness to slaughter innocents. Carr also ignores the influential horrors of the Mexican American War. As many have argued, racism and imperialism are primary influences in the conduct of most American wars, not just Sherman.

Proving Sherman's pivotal role in the thinking of succeeding American military leaders is essentially impossible. The thesis seems most plausible for the Philippine-American war which involved Civil War veterans who served with Sherman. But once again, skin tone and territorial acquisition seem better explanations for the conduct of that war. Military thinkers like Giulio Douhet and William "Billy" Mitchell were clearly more influential than Sherman once airpower became the primary means of waging war. Carr's argument for "Shermanlike" activity grows weaker in later conflicts. He equates the modern military's post-Vietnam media manipulation with Sherman's distaste for the Union press, and refers to Iraqi sanctions as a "Sherman's march without armies or soldiers." It's difficult to see Sherman's legacy in a hands-off approach like a sanction. This connection seems even weaker considering sanctions are essentially modern sieges, which predate the Union general by centuries.

Carr is most successful when references to Sherman become scant and he focuses on criticizing the horrors of twentieth century American warfare. His examination of immoral American conduct in the War on Terror is particularly compelling. Carr also provides a detailed examination of America's constant push to advance its destructive capabilities through technological developments. He aptly questions the reasoning behind America's apparent desire to constantly wage war.

Carr spends most of his effort trying to show how Sherman influenced others while largely overlooking what influenced Sherman, an addition which would strengthen the book. Despite Carr's limited focus, the American way of war draws on a deeper well of menace than Sherman alone. It may be that Sherman's quips like "war is hell," not his actual campaigns, are his most important contributions to later American warfare. Measuring the influence of his words is difficult, but they have served as a convenient way for American military leaders to dismiss criticism and excuse virtually any immoral act they commit. In this way Sherman's ghost continues to haunt American rhetoric.

Garrett McKinnon completed his Master's degree in American History at Louisiana State University and is pursuing his PhD in American History at Duke University. His research focuses on American drone development and the morality of their combat use from World War I to the present, on which he currently has an article under consideration with the Journal of Military History.