**Nov. 15, 1864: Sherman's March to the Sea Changes Tactical Warfare**

**1864:** Union troops under Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman burn the heart of Atlanta to the ground and begin their March to the Sea. By the time they're done, the tactics of warfare will be changed forever.

After driving the Confederates out of Atlanta, Sherman entered the city in early September and remained until Nov. 15. Sparing only the churches, courthouse and the city's private residences, Sherman's troops cut the telegraph wires and burned everything else of consequence: warehouses, train depots, factories.

Then the army set off, four corps divided into two columns, on its [march to the sea](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/shermans-march-to-the-sea.htm).

In a 62-day campaign of destruction, the 62,000-man Union force cut a ruinous, 60-mile-wide swath through Georgia: tearing up railroads, firing factories, destroying bridges, burning plantations, seizing livestock and freeing slaves. The army lived off the land, sacking the unfortunate homesteads and plantations that lay along the line of march.

After Savannah fell on Dec. 22, Sherman paused only long enough to secure the seaport before swinging north into the Carolinas. The destruction wrought by the Federals in South Carolina -- the first Southern state to secede from the Union -- was even worse than it had been in Georgia.

Vengeance aside, the real objective of Sherman's march was to cut the Confederacy in two, cripple Southern industrial capacity, destroy the railroad system and compel an early Confederate surrender. It was also intended to break Southern morale -- in Sherman's words, to "make Georgia howl."

[Sherman](http://ngeorgia.com/ang/William_Tecumseh_Sherman) was vilified for his barbarism, but the Union commander was a realist, not a romantic. He understood as few of his contemporaries seemed to that technology and industrialization were radically changing the nature of warfare.

It was no longer a question of independent armies meeting on remote battlefields to settle the issue. Civilians, who helped produce the means for waging modern war, could no longer be considered innocent noncombatants. Hitting the enemy where he ate and breaking him psychologically were just as important to victory as vanquishing his armies in the field.

Sherman grasped this and, though he wasn't the first military proponent of [total war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_war), he was the first commander to deliberately strike at the enemy's infrastructure. The scorched-earth tactics were effective. The fragile Southern economy collapsed and a once-stout rebel army was irretrievably broken.

Meanwhile, the marshals of Europe watched Sherman's progress with fascination. And they learned.

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