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JOHN BENNETT WALTERS, TOTAL WAR, AND THE RAID ON
RANDOLPH, TENNESSEE

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Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Thomas Lee Anderson

August 2009

JOHN BENNETT WALTERS, TOTAL WAR, AND THE RAID ON
RANDOLPH, TENNESSEE

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ABSTRACT

The regnant interpretation of the American Civil War includes the fact that it evolved into a “total war,” which adumbrated the total wars of the twentieth century. Mark E. Neely, in 1991, published an influential paper calling this interpretation into question for the first time. In the article Neely revealed that the first mention of “total war” in connection with the Civil War was an article written in 1948 by John Bennett Walters about Gen. William T. Sherman and a raid he ordered on Randolph, Tennessee in reprisal for an attempted hijacking of the packet boat *Eugene* on the Mississippi River.

Walters castigates Sherman’s raid as brutal, cruel, and wanton and tries to depict Sherman as a violent and hateful man who set out to punish Southerners for turning their backs on the Union. He—along with modern residents of Tipton County, Tennessee—claim that Sherman burned the whole town to the ground. But a close investigation of the target of Sherman’s attack shows that Randolph, Tennessee had been a ghost town since the mid 1840s with the result that very little actual damage was done. There may have been as many as six dwellings in the area along with dozens of abandoned and derelict buildings. Sherman’s orders to the troops were to let the citizens know that Union officials abhorred this kind of violence but were forced by guerilla activities to burn their

homes to discourage continued attacks on river boats. The residents were given sufficient time to remove their belongings before the buildings were set afire.

The results of this investigation suggest that the raid on Randolph might be emblematic of much of the purported devastation of the South by Sherman and his armies. Perhaps the “total war” on the South was illusory and has been greatly exaggerated along with the destructiveness of the Civil War. The term “total war” seems never to have been used in the nineteenth century. Total war is a twentieth-century term and is completely bound up with twentieth-century technology, especially with aircraft as weapons of mass destruction. The kind of destruction encompassed by “total war” was unimaginable in Civil War times, especially the deliberate killing of noncombatant civilians. It is argued, then, that the use of the term “total war” to describe the American Civil War is anachronistic and thus entails the projection of twentieth century realities into the past.

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It never occurred to historians prior to World War II to ask whether or not the Civil War was a total war, but since that time the question has been asked frequently and mostly answered in the affirmative. The view that the Civil War was a “total war” has gained the acceptance of most Civil War historians. Because this interpretation is so widespread, few historians explain what it is that they mean by “total war.” They take for granted that readers will understand the term. For instance, T. Harry Williams, a highly respected historian of the Civil War, used “total war” in the first sentence of his influential book, *Lincoln and His Generals*.¹ But he fails to explain what he means by it, and the term does not appear again until one of his final chapters, where he again does not bother to explain what he means. Apparently he, like many other Civil War historians, finds the term unproblematic and assumes that everyone knows what “total war” means and how it applies to the Civil War.

Despite its relatively wide acceptance, some historians, writing in the wake of the Vietnam conflict, saw that the Civil War did not necessarily begin as a “total war,” even if it seemed to end that way. These historians argued that it started as a “limited war” and then progressed to a “total war.” Many, perhaps most, historians now view this transformation from limited to total war as central to a basic understanding of the Civil

¹ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 3, 261.

War. This “total war hypothesis” is the dominant view among Civil War historians in the twenty-first century.

Mark E. Neely, the earliest and most steadfast of the critics of the total war hypothesis, has argued that the concept of “total war” was somehow “in the air” following World War II and that this accounted for the wide and uncritical acceptance among historians of the term “total war.”² Neely simply meant that the term was in wide use and that most educated people understood what it meant—it meant a war in which civilians were targeted by enemy military forces and in which no restraints were acknowledged. Neely’s critique of using the term “total war” to describe the Civil War appeared first in an influential 1991 article in *Civil War History*. More than anything, Neely pointed to how historians had uncritically accepted the term and had repeatedly misused it in their accounts of the Civil War.

What Neely did not specifically mention, but which adds to the problematical use of “total war” to describe the Civil War, is the tendency of historians to use the term in various and imprecise ways. This conceptual fluidity makes analysis difficult, for meanings need to be teased out from context, a process that necessarily involves another layer of interpretation. And even when the term is addressed explicitly, historians still employ the term in radically different ways. A case in point may be found in Phillip Shaw Paludan’s *A People’s Contest*, in which he argues that Sherman had “waged total war against the property, not the lives, of Confederate citizens.” Thus he suggests the

² Mark E. Neely, “‘Civilized Belligerents’: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of ‘Total War,’” in John Y. Simon and Michael E. Stevens, eds., *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1998), 9; Neely, “Was the Civil War a Total War,” *Civil War History* 37 (April 1991): 1-25. For Neely’s detailed critique of the “total war” thesis, see also Neely, *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

possibility that total war can actually, in such an instance, be a “partial, total war.” Other historians, such as Professor Harry S. Stout, disagree and insist on a harsher definition of “total war.” According to Stout, the Civil War was “a total war on the Confederacy that deliberately targeted civilian farms, cities, and—in at least fifty thousand instances—civilian lives.”³

Neely suggests three reasons for the rise and acceptance of “total war” by scholars to describe the Civil War. One flows from the “extravagant threats of violence [that] ruled political debate, much military correspondence, and the journalism of the Civil War era.” The language of the Civil War was often unrestrained even though the behavior of leaders and soldiers generally was not. This fact “helps explain the erroneous impression of the nature of the Civil War that now dominates the field”—that it was “total” and unrestrained. Another factor that helps explain the wide and uncritical acceptance of this idea, says Neely, derives from the emphasis on social history that emerged in the 1960s and continues to attract a good number of Civil War historians. In writing about Civil War combat, social historians have focused increasingly on the individual soldier, a point of view which, out of necessity, emphasizes the horrifying violence and destruction that soldiers on the front line witnessed, usually more than once. By emphasizing the role of individual combatants, some historians greatly exaggerate the violence of the Civil War, which was no more or less violent than, for instance, the Napoleonic Wars. War did not change; historians writing about war changed. A third factor, Neely argues, may be that historians after World War II felt that the Civil War had been romanticized for too long, and they sought to remind their readers that war is awful; that war is bloody, destructive,

³ Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 304; Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006), xvi.

and violent; that war produces dead and dying people and horses and body parts piled up in bloody, filthy messes at the end of a smoking battle. War is not heroic; war is not glorious; war is not a storybook adventure. People needed to know that. Still, Neely suggests, a subtle presentism might have crept unwittingly into historians' efforts to describe the violence of the Civil War.⁴

According to Neely, the first historian responsible for applying the term "total war" to the Civil War was John Bennett Walters, a Southern historian who received a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in 1947, just two years after the close of World War II. In 1948, Walters published an article, "General William T. Sherman and Total War," that attempted to demonstrate how Sherman, while serving in Memphis in the summer of 1862, began to conceive of a new philosophy of war, a philosophy of "total war," by which Walters meant "a plan of action which would destroy the enemy's economic system and terrify and demoralize the civilian population." Walters sought to make his case against Sherman by examining how troops under his general command had burned the community of Randolph, Tennessee, in September 1862. In Walters's formulation, total war consisted of two elements—attacks on the enemy's economic ability to make war, and "the use of military force against the civilian population of the enemy." Walters further believed that "total war" also encompassed a moral component, since, in his view, "total war" was waged with willful disregard for the civilized standards of war and the protections that civilized nations universally offered to civilian noncombatants in the

⁴ Neely, *Civil War*, 215-218. John Keegan, a military historian, notes: "All battles are, in some degree, and to a greater or lesser number of the combatants, disasters. Waterloo was a disaster of very considerable magnitude. Within a space of about two square miles of open, waterless, treeless, and almost uninhabited countryside, which had been covered at early morning by standing crops, lay by nightfall the bodies of forty thousand human beings and ten thousand horses, many of them alive and suffering dreadfully." See Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 199.

nineteenth century. In other words, total war—and particularly the kind of war fought by Sherman against the Confederacy—was immoral, an extreme form of warfare that went against the norms of decency as recognized by the civilized world.⁵

To prove his point, Walters emphasized “[Sherman’s] new concept of the employment of terror against the armies and the civilian population alike.” He referred to Sherman’s military actions in West Tennessee as an “experiment in terror.” Terrorism and terror, of course, are not neutral words; they carry with them large measures of moral opprobrium. And that was precisely what Walters wanted to communicate by using those highly charged terms. What was more, morally loaded claims abounded in Walters’s assessment of Sherman. “Under [Sherman’s] tutelage,” wrote Walters, his soldiers “learned to direct their hatred against the people of the South and to visit upon them the savage art of destruction and the disregard for human rights and dignity which the rules of war had sought to mitigate.” Walters frequently used the language of Lost Cause ideology to underscore Sherman’s lack of moral restraint and how Southerners suffered as victims under his hand. For example, he described Sherman’s march to the sea and beyond as “the application of his philosophy of total war on a grand scale . . . marked by

⁵ John Bennett Walters, “General William T. Sherman and Total War,” *Journal of Southern History*, 14 (November 1948): 1-25. Apparently Walters wrote only this one essay during his career as a historian and an educator. In 1973, he took the text of his dissertation at Vanderbilt, on which the article earlier published in the *Journal of Southern History* was based, added a new preface, and published it as a book about Sherman. See Walters, *The Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973). Walters did no additional research during the intervening twenty-five years. In reviewing this book, Sherman biographer John Marszalek complains that “[i]nstead of analyzing Sherman, Walters indignantly castigates what he characterizes as unnecessary brutalization of a defenseless people and the resultant causation of generations of hatred.” Marszalek suggests that with a little more research and a little insight, Walters might have discovered that Sherman was not a “vicious merchant of terror” at all, but “a pioneer in the use of psychological warfare.” See Marszalek, *Journal of American History* 61, No. 3 (Dec. 1974): 785. Mark Grimsley, however, claims that Marszalek “follows Walters’ basic interpretation” in Marszalek’s own biography of Sherman: *Sherman: A Soldier’s Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 194-196. See Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge and New York: 1997), 115n.

a trail of burned houses, needless destruction of the necessities of life, and the wholesale theft of private property.” According to Walters, upon arriving in South Carolina, Sherman “resumed his campaign of terror on a more extensive scale.” Wherever Sherman went, Walters wrote, “wanton waste, arson, looting, and other indignities [were] visited upon the defenseless citizens by a ruthless soldiery.”⁶

Even if Sherman’s “total war” tactics may have helped win the war, Walters insisted that the Union general made the post-war healing far more difficult by brutalizing Southern civilians: “The utter helplessness of the victims of such brutality, forced to stand by while humiliations and indignities were heaped upon them, left lasting scars upon the memories of those so mistreated.” Walters claimed that Sherman “could view his first full-dress performance in total war with satisfaction.” In the wake of Sherman’s army,” he said, lay “unrestrained pillage and destruction.” As it prepared to leave Atlanta, Sherman’s army, in Walters’s estimation, was ready “to apply the concept of total war with a zeal which only hate could inspire and a thoroughness which represented the culmination of two years of experience in destruction.” Sherman’s army, asserted Walters, “left behind them a trail of terror and desolation, burned homes and towns, devastated fields and plundered storehouses, and a record for systematic torture, pillage, and vandalism unequalled in American history.”⁷

For John Bennett Walters, then, Sherman’s total war involved “terror” against defenseless citizens and “the savage art of destruction”; total war was “terror and desolation”; it was “systematic torture, pillage, and vandalism” and “needless

⁶ Ibid., 465-467, 470-471.

⁷ Ibid., 472-473, 476, 478-479.

destruction.” Sherman taught his soldiers to hate Southerners and to rob them of their human rights and dignity and to brutalize them and visit upon them “unrestrained pillage and destruction.” Walters repeatedly castigated Sherman’s so-called “total war” tactics as both criminal, inasmuch as they violated the rules of war, and unethical, since they violated community standards and basic human rights. And, in Walters’s account, there is the added sense that total war was inescapably more destructive, more violent, more deadly, more vicious, more awful, more savage, more hateful, more brutal, than other kinds of war. Although historians have sometimes not explicitly disclosed the sense in which they use the term “total war,” it is often this last characteristic of terrible war—what one might call “really, really awful war”—that they seem to mean. Walters, as it turns out, is not alone in using exaggerated description to evoke the horrors of total war. Similar language abounds in the Civil War literature right up to current times.⁸

If Walters overdramatized Sherman’s actions and the effects of war, how might we begin to size up the difference between the reality of Union warfare and the extreme rhetoric Walters uses to describe it? One place to start is with the rules of warfare that existed before and during the Civil War. Indeed, it is important to note that all of the “protections” guaranteed to civilian noncombatants by the rules of war—rules which Walters claims Sherman crassly ignored—existed under international law prior to the Civil War and were conditional upon the behavior of the noncombatants. General Orders 100, “Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field,”

⁸ See, for example, James M. McPherson, “From Limited War to Total War,” in *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 66-86. This essay was originally published as “From Limited to Total War: Missouri and the Nation, 1862-1865,” in *Gateway Heritage*, 12 (1992), 4-19. Both versions of the essay were intended as McPherson’s answer to Neely’s “Was the Civil War a Total War?”

signed by President Abraham Lincoln on April 24, 1863, clarifies the essential conditionality of the rules governing the behavior of Union troops toward Confederate civilians, even though those rules were not formally promulgated until later in the war. Nevertheless, the generally accepted rules of war specified that noncombatants were to be protected only if military necessity permitted. For instance, General Orders 100 provide that “the noncombatant or civilian population should be free from all violence or constraint *other than that required by military necessity*.” Another rule recognized what today would be called “collateral damage” by stating that “the unarmed citizen is to be spared in person, property and honor *as much as the exigencies of war will admit*.” These protections did not extend to those who took up arms against the occupying forces. According to Union General Henry W. Halleck, who in 1861 wrote a textbook on the international law of war, “*So long as they refrain from all hostilities, pay the military contributions which may be imposed on them, and quietly submit to the authority of the belligerent who may happen to be in military possession of their country, they are allowed to continue in the enjoyment of their property, and in the pursuit of the ordinary avocations.*”⁹ It was left to the military commanders of occupied areas to judge the meaning of “military necessity” and “the exigencies of war.”

Walters hoped to lay bare the process by which Sherman’s plan for total war was developed, but it actually became one of the weakest elements in his article. For instance, in his attempt to elucidate the process by which Sherman formulated his

⁹ General Order 100, April 24, 1863, U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Army*, 130 vols. (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1880-1902), Ser. 3, 3: 148-164 (hereinafter, *O.R.*); Henry W. Halleck, *International Law; or, Rules Regulating the Intercourse of States in Peace and War* (San Francisco: H. H. Bancroft & Company, 1861), 427. Italics mine. Walters also cites these General Orders and Halleck’s comment in “General William T. Sherman,” 447-448.

presumably immoral and violent philosophy of war, Walters maintained that the answer could be found in Sherman's "own personal background of failure and frustration, out of which had come both an extreme sensitiveness to criticism and an impelling desire to attain security." Walters believed that Sherman sought to overcome earlier accusations of his insanity in Kentucky and his combat mistakes at Shiloh by carrying out brutalities against Confederate soldiers and civilians. He also pointed to an alleged cognitive anomaly that afflicted Sherman—an anomaly, if Walters is to be believed, that led the Union general to leap "over wide gaps of fact and reason and to proceed on the basis of his inspirations and convictions with the utmost faith in the soundness of his conclusions." It was this cognitive deficiency, Walters argued, that led Sherman to conclude that small groups of guerillas rather than regular Confederate soldiers were committing the frequent acts of violence and destruction in West Tennessee against Union military assets.¹⁰

But Walters, in making this psychological diagnosis, relied on Sherman's bombast and the general's own proclivity for immoderate rhetoric, something which Neely has identified as one of the possible sources in the evolution of the "total war hypothesis." Walters quoted a famous line from one of Sherman's letters to his brother, Senator John Sherman of Ohio, written in August 1862: "It is about time the North understood the truth. That the entire South, man, woman, and child are against us, armed and determined."¹¹ From this and other statements made by Sherman, Walters constructed his case for the general's "hatred" of Southerners and his development of a

¹⁰ Walters, "General Sherman," 452, 458.

¹¹ Sherman's letter quoted in *ibid.*, 460-461.

plan of terror against them. But Walters made broad claims regarding Sherman's attitudes and mental processes without taking into account that the Union general was not alone in his ideas and attitudes, that other people in similar circumstances shared these attitudes and ideas.

The problem of contending with hostile citizens in occupied territory was not, for example, something that only Union officers had to face. Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith, who was operating in Unionist East Tennessee around this same time, confronted similar partisan activity against his forces. On August 20, 1862, while Sherman and other Union commanders faced guerilla attacks on their patrols and on Mississippi River shipping, Gen. Kirby Smith issued a bulletin to the citizens of Knox County in eastern Tennessee and neighboring counties in southern Kentucky. He warned Unionist citizens to remain in their homes and assured them they could go about their business as usual without fear. "If, on the contrary, you persist in firing upon my soldiers from the woods, you will be hung when you are caught, and your houses and property will be destroyed."¹² Because they spent less time in enemy territory, Confederate commanders did not encounter hostile guerilla activities as frequently as did their Union counterparts. Nevertheless, whenever they ventured into Union territory they had to deal with the same general problems that frustrated Sherman. Nor did the idea that all secessionists were enemies of the Union originate with Sherman. Public opinion throughout the North held that secessionists were traitors, especially after the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861.

¹² Diary of Events, August 20, 1862, in Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record*, 11 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1864), 5:62.

But what mostly caused difficulties for Sherman—and what governed his reaction to hostile civilians—was the reality of attacks on Union shipping that occurred regularly on the Mississippi River along those portions of the river under Federal control. Other Union officers found these attacks to be just as troublesome as Sherman did. In August 1862, General Benjamin F. Butler, the Union commander in New Orleans, sent the 21st Indiana up river to discourage guerillas who had been shooting at boats from the Arkansas side. Ezra Read, the regimental surgeon, reported to Governor Oliver P. Morton of Indiana that the regiment routed a force of 500 Texas Rangers deployed on the west bank of the Mississippi River. The Texans, said Read, were sent to protect guerillas who shot at boats on the river. Union troops defeated an attempt by the Texas troops to ambush them, turned the tables, and captured almost 300 horses that had been ridden into the swamps and cane breaks and then abandoned. The Texas Rangers, wrote Read, continued to flee on foot through the swamps. Read clearly articulated his patriotism and devotion to the Union cause, but he also revealed his low opinion of secessionists: “The twenty-first [regiment] will perform its part nobly and well. It is for its country, first, last, and forever; and against every man and woman whose hands are against it, and against all men who will not sustain it in its terrible trials to sustain the best Government ever framed by human mind.”¹³ Read’s comment was less inflammatory than Sherman’s own rhetoric, but the underlying sentiment was the same—secessionist civilians, like Confederate soldiers, opposed the Union, and any good Union man was duty bound to oppose those Southerners in turn.

Central to Walters’ thesis about Sherman’s development of a plan to wage “total war” against the Confederacy, including its civilians, is an incident that occurred at

¹³ Ezra Read to Oliver P. Morton, September 12, 1862, in *ibid.*, 611-612.

Randolph, Tennessee in September 1862. Sherman's actions at Randolph, Walters claims, show that the general, after learning that some shots had been fired at a Union packet boat, began to wage "total war" against the civilian population of Tipton County by "ordering that vengeance be wreaked on the town because it happened to be near the scene of the trouble." According to Walters, Sherman responded to the report that the Union boat *Eugene* had come under fire near Randolph by ordering Col. C. C. Walcutt and his 46th Ohio Volunteers to burn most of the town, but to leave one house standing to mark the spot. In this way, said Walters, Sherman intended to discourage further attacks on Mississippi River boats. This action was, Walters claimed, an unrestrained use of military force against innocent civilians and it constituted a violation of the accepted rules of war. He insisted that Sherman waged "total war"—the unrestrained use of military force against a civilian population—on hapless residents of Randolph, a town in West Tennessee, in Tipton County. In Walters's view, "all restraints were being cast aside."¹⁴ But did Walters provide an accurate account of what happened at Randolph? A closer examination of the incident sheds new light on Sherman's actions and on Tipton County in the autumn of 1862. And it also gives some new meaning to John Bennett Walters's interpretation of the affair.

* * *

On Tuesday, September 23, 1862, the packet boat *Eugene*, on its regular trip downriver from Cairo, Illinois, to Memphis, carried freight, passengers, U.S. mail, and

¹⁴ Walters, "General Sherman," 462.

Union officers. According to some reports, the *Eugene* had freight and two passengers bound for Randolph, but other sources claim the packet boat was decoyed into landing at Randolph by a man who hailed her from shore. In any event, when the boat landed at Randolph at about 3 P.M., there was no one in sight. The ship's clerk, Mr. Dalzell, stepped ashore and headed up the hill to find out what was afoot. Suddenly the doors flew open at one of the derelict warehouses at Randolph. Out leapt a crowd of thirty-five armed partisans, led by a certain "Col. Faulkner," who took Dalzell into custody. Despite having a pistol held to each side of his head, Dalzell called out a warning to the *Eugene*. With this, the ambushers began firing at the boat as those on board attempted to take the *Eugene* back into the currents of the Mississippi River. Women and children poured out onto the decks to see what was happening. The captain and the pilot, who were also on deck, ducked for cover, and only the quick-thinking of the ship's engineer, who scrambled under fire to reach the helm, allowed the *Eugene* to escape the armed attack. No one was injured, but there were dozens of bullet holes in the pilot house. Upon reaching Memphis that evening, the crew, along with Union officers who had been aboard, provided Gen. Sherman with a detailed report concerning the attack on the *Eugene* at Randolph.¹⁵ As for Mr. Dalzell, the ship's clerk, according to the unnamed reporter for the *Louisville Daily Journal*, he was taken to Col. Faulkner's camp ten miles distant from Randolph where he was threatened with hanging and finally released and escorted back to the Randolph area. The reporter pointed out that Faulkner and Dalzell were acquainted with each other through their travels on the river.

¹⁵ "Destruction of the Town of Randolph," *Louisville (KY) Daily Journal*, September 30, 1862; Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, September 26, 1862, in *O.R.*, Ser. 1, 17 (Part 2), 236.

In Walters's account, he criticized Sherman for jumping "to the conclusion that this attack was the action of guerillas, and casually brushing aside the possibility that it might have been made by Confederate soldiers."¹⁶ But Walters ignored a great deal of evidence about the Randolph incident in order to level his criticisms of Sherman. For example, the attack was made in broad daylight with dozens of witnesses on board the *Eugene*, none of whom reported seeing Confederate soldiers. If the attackers were soldiers who were out of uniform then they were worse than guerillas, they were spies. Walters overlooked important parts of Sherman's orders to Col. Walcutt of the 46th Ohio Volunteers. While Sherman did order Walcutt to burn the town of Randolph (with the exception of a single house), he also instructed him to "let the people know and feel that we deeply deplore the necessity of such destruction, but we must protect ourselves and the boats which are really carrying stores and merchandise for the benefit of secession families, whose fathers and brothers are in arms against us. If any extraordinary case presents itself to your consideration you may spare more than one house; but let the place feel that all such acts of cowardly firing upon boats filled with women and children and merchandise must be severely punished." Sherman also ordered Walcutt to have his quartermaster make a list of all property destroyed in the raid along with the names of the owners so that damages could eventually be paid if warranted.¹⁷

These additional details about Sherman's orders to Walcutt mitigate the view of "Sherman-as-terrorist," which Walters urged in this article. There are other details that Walters overlooked or, perhaps, purposely neglected. How much damage was really

¹⁶ Walters, "General Sherman," 462.

¹⁷ Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, September 26, 1862, in *O.R.*, Ser. 1, 17 (Part 2), 236.

done at Randolph? What size town was Randolph? Were businesses targeted? Was the economic system of Tipton County attacked?

* * *

Tipton County, Tennessee, where Randolph is located, was an agricultural county in the western part of the state where families raised cotton and corn and hogs, as they do today. The western boundary of the county is the Mississippi River, and at one time (before 1837) some people in Randolph hoped their town would become a major shipping point for local cotton. They aspired to compete with Memphis, a larger port forty miles downstream at the mouth of the Wolf River.

When Tennessee held its referendum on secession in June 1861, the state voted almost 3 to 1 in favor of leaving the Union. The city of Memphis did not wait for that vote; it seceded from the Union four days after the South Carolinians fired on Fort Sumter in April. In Tipton County the vote on June 8, 1861 was 943 for secession to 16 against. All 16 “no” votes were said to have come from the hamlet of Portersville, where a few Yankee families had settled. In 1862 Tipton County was a hotbed of Confederate feeling and of civilian resistance to Union efforts to pacify West Tennessee.¹⁸

The town of Randolph was founded in the late 1820s. Despite the desire of the settlers to create a place that would become a commercial rival of Memphis, especially during the times when Memphis was struck by outbreaks of yellow fever, the depression

¹⁸ Gaylon Neil Beasley, *True Tales of Tipton: Historical Accounts of Tipton County, Tennessee* (Covington, Tenn.: Tipton County Historical Society, 1981), 18.

of 1837-38 hit Randolph hard when the price of cotton sank to 8.5 cents per pound from 17 cents. In addition, a period of low water in the Hatchie River, which formed the northern and eastern boundaries of Tipton County, caused cotton to be shipped overland to Memphis rather than downriver to Randolph, creating more economic woes for the town. The town's only bank closed in 1837, while its newspaper, the *Randolph Recorder*, folded that same year. Then a sand bar began to form at Randolph, a part of the natural process by which the Mississippi regularly alters its course, that made it increasingly difficult for steamboats to dock there. Moreover, the bluffs began to collapse forming a series of huge "steps" 20 to 30 feet above each other. Two other disasters struck Randolph: The proposed railroad route through Randolph was relocated to Memphis, and a proposed canal linking the Hatchie and Tennessee rivers was killed by politics in 1832. President Andrew Jackson, and others, opposed internal improvements funded by the federal government.¹⁹

According to an area resident, Randolph "was the most flourishing business river town in West Tennessee on the Mississippi." He claimed that if the canal had been built connecting the Tennessee River with the Hatchie, Randolph's growth would have been assured and Memphis would have remained forever, a "village at the mouth of the Wolf." Alas, after the railroad route was lost to Memphis, Randolph's businessmen moved downriver to Memphis, and "Randolph as it was, is now only in name, and lives alone in

¹⁹ Edward F. Williams, "Memphis' Early Triumph over Its River Rivals," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, 22 (1968), 5—32; Williams, "Early Memphis and its River Rivals," *ibid.*, 24.

the history of ‘Old Times in the Big Hatchie Country.’” By 1845, Randolph was a ghost town.²⁰

Following the opening salvos on Fort Sumter, in April 1861, a letter from an unnamed Tipton County resident appeared in the *Memphis Appeal* suggesting that state authorities send troops and artillery to Randolph. In the letter the author referred to Randolph as a “near deserted village that was once the mighty arch-rival of Memphis.” Randolph was, the writer claimed, the perfect place, high on the Chickasaw bluffs, from which to defend Memphis from an attack by Union forces on the Mississippi. Tennessee Governor Isham Harris promptly dispatched Lt. Col. Marcus Wright of the 154th militia regiment at Memphis to Randolph where, on the site of the “near-deserted village,” Fort Wright/Fort Randolph was constructed.²¹ Some of the town’s derelict buildings provided lumber for the construction of warehouses, while an underground powder magazine was dug out of the banks of the Mississippi. By early May it was reported in the *Memphis Daily Appeal* that 400 men were in training at Randolph. At the end of May, soon-to-be Confederate Generals John Sneed and Gideon Pillow hosted a visit to Fort Wright from several Memphis-area ladies who were “sumptuously entertained.”²²

During the summer of 1861 officials from the Confederate national government came to Tennessee to take control of the troops and the defenses. There was a great hue and cry from concerned citizens worried about the loss of local control, but they were

²⁰ Joseph S. Williams, *Old Times in West Tennessee: Reminiscences—Semi-Historic—of Pioneer Life and the Early Emigrant Settlers in the Big Hatchie Country* (Memphis: W. G. Cheeney, 1873), 194ff.

²¹ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 20, 1861; Helen Ballard, *Randolph, Tennessee: Rollin’ on the River* (n.p.: self published, 1986), 11.

²² *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 2, 29, 1861. Tipton County officials are working to develop the remnants of the powder magazine into a tourist attraction.

mollified by both Confederate and Tennessee officials who assured them of convergent interests. In July Fort Wright was closed; the troops and equipment were moved upriver to Fort Pillow. Randolph became once again a near-deserted village along the Mississippi.

* * *

Sherman, says Walters, “exploded into action” when he heard the report of the attack on the *Eugene*.²³ By nightfall on September 24, 1862, the *Ohio Belle* and the *Eugene* were filled with the Ohio 46th Volunteer Infantry along with a battalion of artillery. Sherman had suggested to Col. Walcutt, whom he placed in command of the expedition, that he send one boat past Randolph to see it would draw fire; if it did, Walcutt and his troops would know then what they were up against at Randolph. The flotilla reached the area before daybreak on September 25. The *Ohio Belle* landed Walcutt and his troops below Randolph while the *Eugene* steamed up the Mississippi as far as Fort Pillow without drawing any fire. Meanwhile Walcutt and his troops reached Randolph without resistance. They found no town, only a mostly deserted village with six houses and dozens of abandoned and derelict buildings left over from Fort Wright and from older projects at Randolph.

The soldiers let the tiny number of women residents know their orders and the reasons for Gen. Sherman’s instructions to burn their homes. The troops gave the locals a few hours to remove their belongings. A relative of one of the women later wrote that the Yankees were very helpful—there was one woman who was bedridden so they came

²³ Walters, “General Sherman,” 461.

to her assistance to move her and her possessions out of the house (and then, once she was gone, they helped themselves to such of her property as they desired). Then the soldiers burned what buildings there were in the town, except for the single structure Sherman had ordered to be left standing.²⁴ Although it was a sad and stressful day for a few West Tennesseans, the assault on Randolph cannot be said to be a prime example of what Walters—and later historians—would call “total war.”

Walters saw this episode in a far different way: “While it was true that bands of guerillas were extremely active in the region around Memphis and that unorganized civilian resistance was frequently encountered, Sherman’s disposition to consider all resistance as treacherous acts of the civilian population prepared the way for the next steps in the development of his attitude on the conduct of the war.”²⁵ But what Walters missed, or could not see, was that Sherman’s reprisal against Randolph was not a step in any grand scheme to wage war against the Southern civilian population, but was instead a response to real threats and incidents of violence against Union resources.

Indeed, it was militarily prudent for Sherman to take into account all resistance that arose from Confederate military forces but also from the civilian population, since it was quite possible that Confederate soldiers might have disguised themselves as civilians or that civilians were actually operating in the area as guerilla fighters. Sherman, as the commanding officer of an occupying force, did not have the investigative resources of a peacetime judicial system. Nevertheless, he had to make decisions about protecting his troops and supplies; he also needed to maintain law and order in his jurisdiction.

²⁴ R.H. Munford, *Historical sketch of Tipton County Tenn.*, from Tennessee Historical Collection (Tennessee State Archives, Misc. MSS. File, Box T2: No. 67), 1876. This story may be apocryphal. It was recorded by the relative of a witness many decades after the event.

²⁵ Walters, “General Sherman,” 460.

* * *

Is it accurate to view the episode at Randolph, Tennessee as a “total war” incident in which Sherman “cast aside all restraints?” Sherman ordered Col. Walcutt to apologize to the citizens and explain to them why this disagreeable action had to be taken. The Ohio soldiers provided sufficient time for residents to remove their belongings. Walcutt’s quartermaster kept a record of the property that was destroyed, and it appears that only half a dozen homes were burned, along with dozens of abandoned and derelict buildings.

It is important to keep in mind that “total war” is a twentieth-century term and is bound up with twentieth-century technology. It was first used in the 1920s to describe the possibility of using airplanes to bypass the front lines to bomb an enemy’s homeland selecting both civilian and military targets. This is neither a sufficient nor a necessary reason that “total war” cannot be used to describe the Civil War or even the incident at Randolph; but, because the term is so intimately connected to twentieth-century technology, it is difficult to use it accurately when applying it to anything that happened in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, comparing a well-documented “total war” incident with the incident at Randolph, Tennessee might be instructive.

Late in World War II, on March 9, 1945, hundreds of B-29s streamed out of the Marianas loaded with napalm. Their destination was Tokyo, the capitol of Japan. With few military targets remaining in Japan, the strategic point of this raid was to burn Tokyo to the ground and inflict such horrifying casualties on Japanese civilians that the war would have to end. “Within five months [in 1945],” writes historian Niall Ferguson,

“roughly two-fifths of the built-up areas of nearly every major city had been laid waste, killing nearly a quarter of a million people, injuring more than 300,000 and turning eight million into refugees.” Eighty to a hundred thousand Japanese noncombatant civilians were burned to death on that March night in 1945.²⁶

That was “total war,” at least until the 1950s when the term acquired additional nightmarish qualities as the USSR developed its own nuclear arsenal. The comparison between the fire bombing of Tokyo in 1945 and Randolph in 1862 (or even the Union army’s destruction of Atlanta or Columbia in 1864) must not stop at the obvious quantitative level, at the mere, sheer numbers. For even if Sherman had been handed the wherewithal to instantly kill a quarter of a million Southerners, or maybe even a mere 50,000, he probably would not have made use of such a destructive ability. The kind of slaughter that occurred in Tokyo and in other places, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, was unthinkable to anyone who pondered the destructive capacity of warfare in 1862. Humankind needed technological advances, like the machine gun, and massive political and diplomatic failures, such as occurred to bring on World War I and World War II, to enhance war’s destructiveness to a level of mass annihilation. Seeing the Civil War, and the minor incident at Randolph in 1862, as unrestrained acts of brutality reveals how anachronistic Walters’s description of Sherman’s infliction of “total war” on the residents of western Tennessee actually is. To read the destructiveness of the twentieth century—both in its moral and its technological significance—backwards into the previous century is to commit the cardinal historical sin of undermining “the integrity and

²⁶ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 573.

the pastness of the past.”²⁷ No matter how much the world may need to hear about the dangers of war, no matter what moral message one has for the salvation of the world, no historian has the right to try to change the past.

The concepts of “limited war” and “total war” are forever married to the twentieth century where the latter came to mean, during the Cold War, a war of mutual annihilation, a war in which multi-megaton missiles might blast human civilization back at least into the Stone Age. The idea that this term “total war” ever had a legitimate application in our study of the American Civil War seems strange. This historiographical anomaly may, just in its outlandish, comedic aspects, serve to advance Page Smith’s assertion in 1964 that “historical perspective,” our distance in time from an event, is no guarantee of fairness and balance.²⁸ That William Tecumseh Sherman could be vilified as a terrorist for his raid on Randolph seems inexplicable when the evidence surrounding the event is taken into full consideration.

* * *

But it is also odd that Walters’s article should have influenced other historians to accept the description of the Civil War as “total war,” for there is no clear link between Walters’s exposition of the Randolph episode and the later use of the term by historians writing in the remaining decades of the twentieth century, despite Neely’s assumption of such a thread. Neely believes that Walters’s thesis “was quickly adopted by T. Harry Williams, whose influential book *Lincoln and his Generals*, published in 1952, began

²⁷ Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 8.

²⁸ Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 197.

with this memorable sentence: ‘The Civil War was the first of the modern total wars, and the American democracy was almost totally unready to fight it.’” Skipping nearly forty years of intervening Civil War historiography, Neely also notes that historian Phillip Shaw Paludan asserted that “Grant’s war making” amounted to “total war” because he demanded the unconditional surrender of the enemy forces he defeated on the battlefield.²⁹ But Neely’s observation turns out to be superficial. Having used “total war” in the first sentence of his book, Williams did not use it again until page 261, and even by then, it was not entirely clear what he meant by “total war.” The thread between Walters and Williams and Paludan is one of only appearances, not of substance. Williams and Paludan both list Walters’s article in their bibliographies, but neither of these authors actually discusses Walters’s thesis or cites his article in their footnotes. In fact, a strong case can be made the Williams and Paludan use definitions of “total war” that differ considerably from Walters’s use of the term.

Another prominent Civil War historian, James M. McPherson, departs from Walters’s use of the term “total war,” but McPherson’s arguments have a bearing on a consideration of Walters’s claims about Sherman and the raid on Randolph because many Civil War scholars, influenced by McPherson’s high status in the profession, have followed him in concluding that the Civil War was, indeed, a total war. McPherson’s interpretation reveals, to some extent at least, how Walters’s application of “total war” to Sherman and his actions in western Tennessee set the stage for the rise of the “total war” thesis in the second half of the twentieth century. The point here is that scholars did not necessarily build on Walters’s thesis by laying one block at a time to erect the “total war”

²⁹ Neely, “Was the Civil War a Total War?” 4. Neely is referring to Paludan’s book, *A People’s Contest: The Union and the Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

edifice. Instead, they have used and accepted Walters's terminology without giving its anachronistic nature much thought. McPherson is a case in point.

Almost fifty years after John Bennett Walters wrote his article on "total war," McPherson published an article in which he argues that the Civil War went through a transformation from a "limited war" to a "total war." He speculates that many historians have labeled the Civil War a "total war" because of "the devastation wrought by the war, the radical changes it accomplished, and the mobilization of the whole society to sustain the war effort." Absolute war and total war," writes McPherson, both mean "war 'without any scruple or limitations,' war in which combatants give no quarter and take no prisoners." But, McPherson allows at first that "in that sense of totality, the Civil War was not a total war." Quoting Neely, he agrees that no one in the Civil War "systematically" targeted civilians. He echoes Neely's point that the rhetoric of the Civil War "was far more ferocious than anything that actually happened" and that we need to look beyond the immoderate rhetoric to find what people actually did. We must avoid judging the Civil War simply by what somebody said. McPherson concludes that "those who insist that the Civil War was not a total war appear to have won their case."³⁰

But, McPherson, despite having just acknowledged the victory of the critics of "total war," suddenly reverses himself. He maintains that phrases used by other historians, including "destructive war" and "hard war," "do not convey the true dimensions of devastation in the Civil War." Instead, McPherson argues that for the people who lived through the Civil War, especially Southerners, the war "*seemed* total"

³⁰ McPherson, "From Limited War to Total War," 67-70.

and therefore it was “total.”³¹ Although he strives to identify a commonality between the past and the present, McPherson only succeeds in applying an anachronism to the past. He labels the Civil War a “total war” because it produced a sense of dread and calamity among the people who lived through it.

Despite his own shifting stand on the issue of “total war,” McPherson forges ahead with an analysis of “the evolution” that occurred between 1861 and 1865 and changed the Civil War from a limited war into a total war. To begin with, he asserts that both sides, Union and Confederate, started with “limited” goals for the war. But eventually, he says, the nature of the war changed and became “remorseless” and “revolutionary,” when Union policy began to target Southern civilians. Echoing John Bennett Walters’s assessment of Sherman’s response to guerilla attacks in West Tennessee, McPherson writes: “These operations convinced Sherman to take off the gloves. The distinction between enemy civilians and soldiers grew blurred. After fair warning, Sherman burned houses and sometimes whole villages in western Tennessee that he suspected of harboring snipers and guerillas.” Then he even borrows a Sherman quote lifted from Walters’s book, *Merchant of Terror*, to prove that the Union general had taken up “total war” against the South.³²

In support of his “total war hypothesis,” McPherson merely recites the inherited and incendiary wisdom about the Civil War. He writes of “the devastation and suffering caused by the army’s scorched earth policy in the South,” a policy that does not hold water when it comes to the incident at Randolph. A hatred of Southerners, McPherson claims, “governed Sherman’s subsequent operations which left smoldering ruins in his

³¹ Ibid., 70.

³² Ibid., 79, 81-82

track from Vicksburg to Meridian, from Atlanta to the sea, and from the sea to Goldsboro, North Carolina.” From this, McPherson concludes that “the kind of conflict the Civil War had become merits the label of total war. To be sure, Union soldiers did not set out to kill Southern civilians. Sherman’s bummers destroyed property; Allied bombers in World War II destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives as well. But the strategic purpose of both was the same: to eliminate the resources and break the will of the people to sustain war.”³³ According to McPherson, the Civil War, even though civilians were not systematically targeted, and even though the devastation done by Union armies appears to have been greatly exaggerated, qualifies as a “total war” because Sherman and Grant were willing to destroy whatever equipment and supplies might benefit Confederate forces, and because they hoped to intimidate Southerners into giving up their war-making. But surely he is mistaken in equating the historical circumstances of the Civil War and World War II. Surely the destruction in these two war differed in both degree *and* kind. Surely McPherson is projecting the devastation of modern warfare back onto the Civil War, and in so doing is committing the historical fallacy of anachronism.

There are four realities present in discussing the term “total war.” Two are mental, or phenomenological, realities, while two are historical realities. There is the way Civil War-era people experienced the war as a mighty and dreadful calamity. There is also the way that twentieth-century people experienced World War II and the peril of a war of mutual annihilation in the decades after 1945. Probably human psychology has not changed very much in one hundred fifty years, so we may safely speculate that these phenomenological realities may be very similar. Having faced a dreadful calamity as the

³³ Ibid., 85.

result of war, twentieth-century people may be well positioned to understand the sense of dread and calamity experienced by people in Civil War times. The third and fourth realities, the historical realities, are the two wars. And just because these wars evoked similar states of mind in participants, it is not necessarily the case that the wars were the same.

“Total war” is a product of the twentieth century. The term seems never to have been used in the nineteenth century. Historians do not agree on when the term first appeared, but there does not seem to be any disagreement about what it first referred to—i.e., the possibility that technology (especially aircraft) made real for bypassing the front lines of a war to attack civilian and military targets within the enemy nation. “Total war” reached an unholy sort of crescendo during World War II in the firebombing of Japanese cities and then in the use of atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The term continued to evolve, and during the Cold War “total war” came to include the nightmarish idea of a “war of mutual annihilation” in which thousands of megatons of hydrogen bombs were poised everyday to destroy the entire human race and nearly everything else on the planet. Few residents of the first world who lived through the 1950s and the 1960s, and even later, could have escaped the dread and foreboding which infected our daily existence. This aspect of “total war”—this idea of the total annihilation of the species—is what makes the term totally inappropriate when applied to the American Civil War, which was still a hundred years away from the technological possibilities of mass death and terror to which this term refers. When historians use the term “total war” to describe the Civil War, they unintentionally project our modern horrors backwards a hundred or more years and assign them to the Civil War generation.

Perhaps we need to abandon this term “total war” in connection with the American Civil War. A new descriptive term is needed that does justice to the experience of people who lived through that war in their own time but that does not conflate the military realities of the Civil War with the specter of twentieth century nuclear war.

* * *

Mark Grimsley, in a history of the Union high command and its treatment of Southern civilians during the war, offers a term that avoids the anachronism of “total war” but accurately captures the intensity of the Civil War in all its aspects. Grimsley suggests that the Civil War was actually a “hard war,” a term he borrows from Sherman’s own use of the phrase “hard hand of war” to describe the Union effort to destroy enemy armies and resources during the final phases of the contest. Instead of a campaign driven by hate in 1863, as pictured by John Bennett Walters and other fans of the “total war hypothesis,” Grimsley detects rational policies and predominantly rational behavior among Union forces as they employed “directed severity” in attacking property that could be used by the Confederate war effort. Homes and supplies for the civilian population, he argues, were generally spared by Union troops. Northern troops were restrained far more often than they were unrestrained.³⁴

Grimsley identifies how Union military policy toward civilians in the rebellious states evolved over time. The first phase of Union military policy toward civilians, a phase which Grimsley labels the “conciliatory” phase, was informed by the belief that widespread pockets of “Unionism” existed in the South and that these people remained

³⁴ Grimsley, *Hard Hand of War*, 152.

secretly loyal to the United States. If Southern civilians were treated well they would turn on the secessionists as soon as Union forces arrived in the neighborhood. An important part of this policy was an explicit stance against interfering with slavery. Lincoln adopted this position from the beginning. He even offered the South, in an attempt to stave off secession, a constitutional amendment guaranteeing noninterference in the peculiar institution in those states which already had slavery. The “strategic dimension” of the conciliatory phase was to “detach Southern civilians from their allegiance to the Confederate government . . . through respect and magnanimity.”³⁵ This conciliatory phase ended during the summer of 1862.

The middle phase of Union policy, Grimsley maintains, was characterized by pragmatism and the lack of a strategic dimension. Union military commanders on the ground “foraged when they needed to forage and retaliated when beset by guerillas, but otherwise viewed civilians as peripheral to their concerns.”³⁶ Indeed, Sherman was in West Tennessee during this pragmatic phase. Grimsley’s focus on the pragmatism behind Union military policy in the occupied South provides a more useful interpretation of Sherman’s actions than does Walters’s idea that the Union general was devising a “total war” policy at this time. Sherman was clearly reacting to guerilla actions when he ordered the raid on Randolph, which is wholly consistent with the pragmatic policy Grimsley delineates.

The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1862, signaled an end to conciliation as Union policy, says Grimsley, and, following the middle phase, ushered in the “hard war” phase of Union military policy toward Southern civilians. This

³⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁶ Ibid.

“hard war” phase began in the western theater in April 1863, but did not appear in the East until 1864 when Grant was elevated to general in chief. Grimsley observes: “The classic hard war operations that historians have found so striking had at least two main attributes. First, they were actions against Southern civilians and property made expressly in order to demoralize Southern civilians and ruin the Confederate economy. . . . Second, they involved the allocation of substantial military resources to accomplish the job.” This hard war phase had the same strategic dimension as the earlier conciliatory phase—“to detach Southern civilians from their allegiance to the Confederate government”—but a different approach to that strategy. This time the approach was through “intimidation and fear,” rather than “respect and magnanimity.”³⁷

As compared to Walters’s interpretation of the Randolph raid as signaling the start of a total, unrestrained, barbarous, brutal and indiscriminate way of making war, Grimsley depicts instead the results of a policy of “directed severity.”³⁸ He reveals that Union conduct in the war at the time of the Randolph incident was rational. The Union had tried a conciliatory policy which, while rationally conceived, failed to accomplish what had been hoped for it. It did not loosen the bonds that connected Southern civilians to the Confederate government. A different policy, the “hard war” policy, still rational, was beginning to guide actions in the field after the failure of conciliation. Sherman, and others, still hoped the Southern civilians could be alienated from their government, but this time they were going to try fear and intimidation. In the end, their new policy worked.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 152.

* * *

Grimsley asks a salient question that sits at the heart of this study: “If the Union Military effort against Southern property was indeed discriminate and roughly proportional to legitimate needs, why have so many interpretations insisted for so long that it was indiscriminate and all-annihilating?” In answering his own question, Grimsley suggests that interpretations of the war’s severity and brutality may have actually begun during the war itself and that they have served different agendas over the decades since. Perhaps, Grimsley says, this might explain the persistence of what Neely calls the “total war hypothesis.”³⁹ One agenda that was obviously served by this view of the conflict was the Confederate agenda itself. Confederate political leaders demonized Northerners, fearing a nascent longing for re-unionism among Southern civilians in the same way Union leaders hoped for it. When Lincoln sent a supply ship to Fort Sumter, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* fulminated against the perfidy and mendacity of the “Black Republicans” in Washington D. C. Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard issued a strident proclamation in June 1861 warning that the Northern abolitionists had been thrown into northern Virginia “murdering civilians, seizing private property” and were intent on “committing other acts of violence and outrage too shocking and revolting to humanity to be enumerated.”⁴⁰

Much of the immoderate rhetoric of the “total war” adherents sounds as though it might have come from Jefferson Davis himself. Grimsley provides a germane sample of Davis’ rhetoric: “Jefferson Davis railed against ‘the savage ferocity’ of Union military

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

conduct. ‘The frontier of our country,’ he wrote in 1863, ‘bears witness to the alacrity and efficiency with which the general orders of the enemy have been executed in the devastation of farms, the destruction of the agricultural implements, the burning of the houses, and the plunder of everything movable.’”⁴¹

Southerners continued these propaganda claims as a part of the Redeemer movement following the war. Eventually they found their way into the accepted tenets of Lost Cause ideology. These claims established that the South had been done an unspeakable wrong and had not been fairly defeated, for the North had conducted an immoral and destructive war against them. Moreover, tales of the brutality of the North afforded many Southerners the opportunity to avoid remembering the destructive and draconian actions of their own government, as “when Grandpappy reminisced about how his team of prized horses had disappeared, he preferred to recall that Yankee vandals had done it—even if the real culprit had been a Confederate impressment agent.”⁴² Perhaps, Grimsley suggests, the perpetuation of the myth of destruction and pillage by Union forces deflects attention from the fact that secession is what brought on the war and it is the South’s fault that so horrible a war ensued as a result.

Whatever the reason for the use of the term “total war” to describe the Civil War, it is now time to retire the phrase from our historical lexicon. Grimsley’s “hard war” suffices to convey the bloody nature of a war that left 620,000 Americans dead (220,000 combat deaths and 400,000 victims of diseases that ravaged camps on both sides) and tens of thousands more wounded. Walters stepped beyond the bounds of historical evidence in ascribing the motive of “total war” to Sherman in the Randolph incident, just

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

⁴² Ibid.

as McPherson and other historians have exaggerated the entire war into a conflagration equal to the destructiveness of World War II.

Historians would be far better served, in fact, by returning to the old work on Lincoln and his commanders written by T. Harry Williams. What Williams accomplished in this book was a lucid and intelligent description of the Civil War's course as a conflict that intensified as it raged on. But his view of the war avoided any suggestion—despite his use of the term offhandedly in two passages of his book—that the Civil War was a “total war.” Describing a war that began with faltering incompetence, for the Union was completely unprepared for war, Williams demonstrated how Lincoln's unwavering insight into the objective of the war—the total defeat of the enemy's armed forces—provided guidance through troubled times. And he traced the slow, but steady, emergence of a modern command system in the Union war effort that at last provided the edge needed for a complete Union victory. According to Williams, this command system emerged organically from the war efforts, from the trial and error process that commanders (and the commander-in-chief) must undergo when they are plunged into the maelstrom of war. Williams saw no need to burden his account with twentieth-century concepts like “limited war” and “total war.” Such terms offered no interpretive advantage, then or now.

The concept of “total war” as applied to the Civil War is irrelevant. What is more, it is an anachronistic intellectual artifact that serves only as an obstacle to our knowing and understanding the Civil War on its own terms.

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