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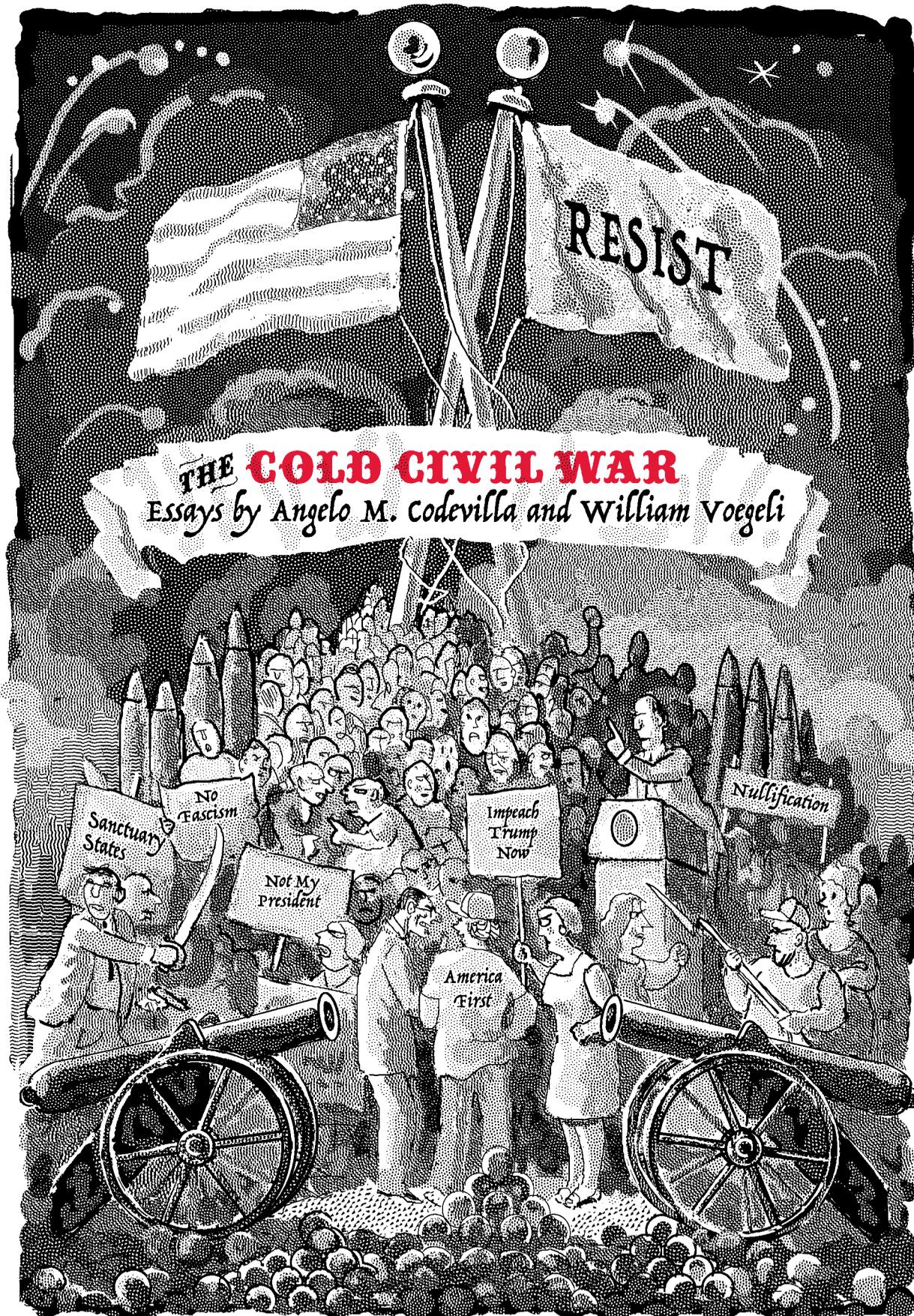
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## FAITHFUL AND HONORABLE

*William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life*, by James Lee McDonough.  
W.W. Norton & Company, 832 pages, \$39.95



**W**ILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN: *In the Service of My Country* is the first biography by James Lee McDonough, a well-regarded Civil War historian and professor emeritus at Auburn University who has written extensively on the war in the West, including Shiloh, Chattanooga, Stones River/Murfreesboro, battles in Kentucky, and John Bell Hood's Tennessee campaign. Biographies are hard, even for accomplished historians, but McDonough provides a balanced portrait of his complex and controversial subject, showing how the man and the nation grew up together.

Born in Ohio in 1820, the son of a successful lawyer who died when Sherman was nine, the future general was raised by Charles Ewing, his father's close friend and a prominent Whig. At age 16 he enrolled in West Point, and upon graduation saw duty throughout the South, including service during the Second Seminole War. One of the few Civil War generals to miss action in the Mexican War,

he served instead in an administrative capacity in California.

Sherman married his foster sister, Ellen Ewing, in 1850, at a time when his father-in-law was serving in Zachary Taylor's cabinet. (The president attended the wedding.) Ellen spent money beyond her husband's income, one of several reasons the marriage was troubled. She was also a devout Catholic, while he had so little use for the Church that he became estranged from a son who entered the priesthood. In addition, Ellen often chose to stay close to her parents rather than accompany Sherman to his duty stations. Finally and most importantly, Ellen and her family constantly pressured Sherman to leave the army, the one American institution he loved unreservedly.

A combination of their entreaties, financial difficulties, and the belief that missing action in Mexico would make promotions difficult led Sherman to resign his commission in 1853. He first became a banker, and was an

honest, conscientious businessman who did well initially, but later suffered from the economic recession of the late 1850s. In 1859 he became superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy, which later became Louisiana State University. He was popular in the state, despite the abolitionist views of his younger brother, an Ohio congressman. (John Sherman went on to serve in the U.S. Senate, and two president's cabinets. He is best remembered today for authoring the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.)

**T**HOUGH SYMPATHETIC TO THE SOUTHERN position on slavery, William Sherman opposed any attempt to break up the Union. (He was, in this respect, typical of many Americans of his day, soldiers included.) Sherman's views on slavery were closer to Stephen Douglas's than to Abraham Lincoln's. He didn't see it as a moral issue, adhering to the position of most Democrats, both "Cop-



perheads” and War Democrats alike—“the Union as it was; the Constitution as it is”—despite his Whig upbringing and sympathies. Sherman became one of the Civil War’s most successful generals, but only after his share of setbacks, as McDonough shows. Though one of the few Union commanders to distinguish himself at the battle of First Manassas early in the war, his subsequent command of the Department of the Cumberland was disastrous. Responsible for an extended geographical region for which he had insufficient resources, Sherman suffered a breakdown and was sent home on leave. The situation was exacerbated by press reports that he was “insane.”

At Shiloh, he was badly surprised by the initial Confederate attack, but redeemed himself once the battle began, coolly and effectively leading his division in the face of the Rebel onslaught. Later, he questioned Ulysses Grant’s unorthodox plan for the Vicksburg campaign: crossing the Mississippi south of the city, abandoning Union supply lines, and investing Vicksburg from the south and east. He later admitted to Grant, however, that his objections were misplaced. Indeed, the Vicksburg campaign remains one of the very best examples of operational art in American military history.

**S**HERMAN’S GREATEST GENERALSHIP during the war was the masterly 1864 campaign to capture Atlanta. Succeeding Grant, who had been elevated to command of all Union armies in March 1864, Sherman commanded an army group comprising the armies of the Tennessee, the Cumberland, and the Ohio. He skillfully maneuvered Confederate general Joseph Johnston out of a succession of strong positions between Chattanooga and Atlanta with relatively little bloodshed, save for an ill-advised frontal assault at Kennesaw Mountain. McDonough credits Sherman’s mastery of logistics—a factor often overlooked by military historians—for much of the campaign’s success. After John Bell Hood replaced Johnston as the Confederate commander, Sherman repulsed a series of Rebel attacks, finally forcing Hood to abandon Atlanta. Its fall in September 1864—“Atlanta is ours and fairly won,” telegraphed Sherman to President Lincoln—contributed greatly to Lincoln’s reelection.

The great controversy about Sherman remains his expulsion of Atlanta’s residents after its capture, and his subsequent “march to the sea,” all designed to break the Southern population’s will. Although he adequately describes these events, McDonough doesn’t judge them, a shocking omission given their centrality to Sherman’s reputation. The

author never asks what we should make of them.

Others have. In *The Hard Hand of War* (1995), Mark Grimsley traced Union policy toward Southerners, which evolved from “reconciliation” to “pragmatism” and finally to “hard war.” Sherman’s actions at Atlanta and after represented the final stage, in which Southerners were identified as either Unionist, neutral, or secessionist—and treated accordingly. The last group was the target of what Grimsley calls “directed severity,” a mixture of ferocity and restraint, characterized by greater destruction of public property than private property, and a general unwillingness to harm civilians physically.

Sherman sought to “make Georgia howl” in his march from Atlanta to Savannah. “We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people,” he reasoned, “and we must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.” Why? “We cannot change the hearts and minds of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible...[and] make them so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal

### Sherman sought to “make Georgia howl” in his march to Savannah.

to it.” Sherman contended that the United States and its representatives had the right to “remove and destroy every obstacle—if need be, take every life, every acre of land, every particle of property, everything that to us seems proper.... [A]ll who do not aid are enemies, and we will not account to them for our acts.”

**M**CDONOUGH CLAIMS THAT SHERMAN was familiar with Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*. There is no real evidence to support this claim, but the march to the sea does reflect Clausewitz’s maxim that war “cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy’s will has not been broken.”

Many have criticized Sherman for his actions. “Had a triumphant Confederacy held war crimes trials, William Tecumseh Sherman would have been the first man indicted,” an earlier biographer, Lee Kennett, wrote. “If nothing else, his habitual verbal violence, his talk of making Georgia ‘howl,’ of inciting ‘fear and dread,’ and the like, would have condemned him.”

In *The Soul of Battle* (1999), Victor Davis Hanson argued the opposite: the march to the sea’s justifiable psychological purpose was to demonstrate to Southern civilians that “they could be hurt” and “the Confederate government was powerless to protect them.” According to Hanson, Sherman’s army exhibited the “soul of battle,” which occurs when a just cause combines with the right commanding general, who then creates an instrument of retribution, imbues it with moral fervor, and turns “the horror of killing to a higher purpose of saving lives and freeing the enslaved.” Sherman’s Army of the West changed the psychological and material course of the Civil War by freeing black slaves and discrediting the planter aristocracy, which had pushed for secession, by revealing that they could protect neither their own homes and families nor anyone else’s.

**M**CDONOUGH’S PORTRAIT OF SHERMAN transcends the Civil War, although that cataclysmic event is central to his image. In illuminating Sherman’s life, McDonough simultaneously paints a portrait of his America, especially the relationship between American society and its army. Sherman frequently expressed contempt for politicians, despite his brother John’s prominent career. His initial impression of Lincoln was negative, although that soon changed. He was especially disdainful of political generals, such as Lincoln’s friend, the Illinois politician John McClernand. Both during the war and his tenure afterwards as commanding general of the army, from 1869 to 1883, he resented civilian secretaries of war who intervened in military affairs.

He created problems for himself by resisting Secretary of War Edwin Stanton’s efforts to enlist black soldiers in the Union army. While the War Department was actively recruiting black soldiers by 1864, the only African-American troops in Sherman’s forces were members of “pioneer” units, i.e., laborers. This disagreement probably contributed to the crisis concerning the terms of surrender that Sherman offered to Johnston in North Carolina. There is no question that Sherman, believing he was operating according to the conciliatory spirit of Lincoln, exceeded his authority by discussing political issues. But Stanton’s venomous reaction, going so far as to accuse him of disloyalty and treasonous behavior, was excessive. Although the crisis passed, Sherman never forgave Stanton, ostentatiously refusing to shake the latter’s hand during the final review of the Grand Army of the Republic. The conflict with Stanton colored Commanding General



Sherman's subsequent relations with the various secretaries of war.

The Civil War also illuminated a civil-military divide that can be traced to the very beginnings of the Republic: regular soldiers versus citizen soldiers. As a West Point graduate, Sherman preferred regular officers and never trusted "talented amateurs," such as John Logan. A competent general respected by his troops, Logan assumed temporary command of the Army of the Tennessee after James McPherson's death during one of the many battles around Atlanta. But after the fighting Sherman assigned permanent command of the army to O.O. Howard, a West Pointer. Sherman's decision angered Logan, feeding his resentment toward West Point and regular officers in general. Returning to Congress after the war, Logan became chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee during Sherman's tenure as commanding general, and got his revenge by introducing a bill that reduced the size of the army and cut Sherman's salary as well as that of other generals. He also took aim at West Point.

**A**LTHOUGH MCDONOUGH DOES ADDRESS the Sherman-Logan dispute, his all-too-brief treatment of Sherman's extended postwar tenure constitutes a major shortcoming of an otherwise excellent biography. Sherman's main concern in those years was Indian policy, but the real story of his postwar career is how difficult civil-military relations became for a prolonged period.

The genesis of the problem was that the army found itself under attack by both sides in the Reconstruction fights between President Andrew Johnson and the Congress,

dominated by Radical Republicans. The low point came when Congress sought to limit Johnson's power while Grant was still commanding general. The army was sucked into a constitutional crisis. Grant, unable to avoid taking sides, supported Congress. After Sherman made some ill-advised comments, Johnson considered him a possible ally and proposed a new military command under Sherman for the capital. Sherman barely avoided being swept into Johnson's praetorian scheme.

Having narrowly survived this crisis, Sherman naturally believed that President Grant would support him as commanding general against civilian interference. But Grant allowed successive secretaries of war to marginalize Sherman, causing a rift between the old comrades. In addition, Sherman moved his headquarters to St. Louis, where he concentrated on writing his memoirs. Even after his nemesis, Secretary of War William Belknap, resigned from office over charges of corruption, it took repeated pleas from his brother, other generals, and Belknap's successor to get Sherman to return to the capital.

The contested election of 1876 placed Sherman in the center of another constitutional crisis. As both political parties threatened to use force to install their candidates, Sherman quietly prepared to maintain order in the capital in the event of violence. Although the "bargain of '77" prevented bloodshed, it also led to an extended political stalemate during which the army became a pawn in the struggle between Republicans and Democrats.

The Democrats in particular targeted the army, which had been deployed by the federal

government to prevent the intimidation of black voters in the South during Reconstruction. In order to restrict the use of the army for domestic law enforcement, the Democrats blocked the 1877 military appropriations bill, leaving officers and soldiers without pay during a particularly busy time: the pursuit of the Nez Perce Indian tribe in the Northwest, and maintaining order during the great railroad strike.

**T**HE CRISIS OF 1877 DID PROVIDE AN opportunity for reform in 1878. One result was a rollback on the use of federal troops as a *posse comitatus* in Reconstruction, which pleased Sherman because it removed the army from local politics. Another was the creation of a commission to examine military reform. Sherman's protégé, the remarkable officer Emory Upton, proposed reforms that were rejected at the time but adopted later, marking a watershed in the professionalization of the army. McDonough mentions Upton in passing but does not do justice to his role.

Sherman died in 1891 and was buried with other members of his family in St. Louis. A plain monument stands nearby, a ten-foot shaft inscribed with the words, "Faithful and Honorable." James Lee McDonough has done a good job of demonstrating that these words truly characterize William Tecumseh Sherman's service to the Republic.

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