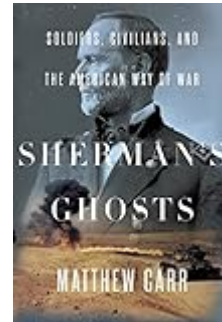


Matthew Carr. *Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War.* New York: New Press, 2015. 352 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59558-955-2.



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War is hell, General William T. Sherman once wrote. In *Sherman's Ghosts: Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Way of War*, journalist Matthew Carr traces the evolution of a change in the American way of war, sparked by Sherman's brutal march through the South, that Sherman might agree has made it more hellish—a new focus on civilians as targets in order to reduce the enemy's will to resist. This is a work of synthesis, a kind of new military history from the cultural perspective, one that reflects Carr's long experience as a journalist generally critical of the American military.

Carr first introduces his conception of how Americans have traditionally viewed war, which is anchored in the influential analysis by Russell F. Weigley. Weigley's 1973 work, *The American Way of War*, echoes strongly throughout Carr's treatment, and it is unfortunate that Carr did not take into account other authors who have added to the Weigley's conception of the American cultural approach to war, such as John Shy (*A People Numerous and Armed*, 1976) and Adrian R. Lewis (*The American Culture of War*, 2007). Lewis in particular offers a thoughtful analysis from which Carr could have profited. Following Weigley, Carr concludes that the pre-Sherman way of war was anchored in the idea of decisive battle against the enemy army, an offensive spirit, and a prefer-

ence for the substitution of technology in place of American lives. To these he might have added Lewis's observations, which include a powerful preference for short wars, a belief in equality of sacrifice, and the view that war is a recourse of last resort, but once resorted to, no effort should be spared to bring it to a swift and decisive conclusion. Despite this quibble, Carr demonstrates an impressive breadth in his knowledge of military affairs, ranging from theory to operations to practice.

The book is organized in two parts. The first is a traditional look at General Sherman and his famous campaign. Carr writes with a blend of fascination and horror at Sherman's deliberate devastation, being careful to temper his criticism of Sherman by presenting him as far more temperate than some of his famous quotations might suggest. He points out that the general rarely, except in South Carolina, allowed his men the free reign to destroy and terrorize the way his hyper-aggressive words might have suggested. Doubtless this will hardly satisfy Sherman's many critics, but those already in favor of the necessity of striking directly at the South's will to resist as a way of reducing the war's duration and devastation will find likely Carr's treatment more balanced. Carr recounts with skill Sherman's background, his impressive use of flying columns or wings, his logistical calculation,

and his operational skill. This is the strongest part of the book, but Sherman is a polarizing figure so this reviewer wonders whether the first half of the book will satisfy either Sherman's critics or his supporters, so careful is Carr to try and present a balanced picture. This is laudable, I think, but it may be an impossible quest. Still, the first half of the book is quite strong and should appeal to the nonspecialist in particular, offering a useful and balanced synthesis that shows where Sherman adhered to and diverged from traditional American approaches.

According to Carr, the key change Sherman made was to dramatically and brutally shift from focusing on the enemy army to the civilian population, owing perhaps to a desire to bring the war to a swift conclusion. Not only did Sherman continue these tactics against Native Americans after the war, but he was promoted and lauded for it. What Carr does not do is to survey any debate or outcry within American society, or the military subculture, concerning Sherman's actions, apart from his brief siege of Atlanta. Instead, Carr concludes that his actions were representative and that the shift of focus from the army to the civilian population has echoed through American military history thereafter.

In the second half, Carr attempts to extend this approach to other American wars. The organization in this section, a thematic survey examining the soldiers, the civilians, the new American way of war, and wars without war, is a little disjointed. The thrust is that Sherman, while not necessarily directly responsible, at the very least represented a new American approach to war, one that focuses on civilians instead of the enemy army.

Unfortunately, the author is highly selective in his choice of what to include in the long period from the Civil War to the modern day, and this mars his thesis. Carr opens by citing American generals Norman Schwartzkopf and Wesley Clark (the first Gulf War and Kosovo respectively), trying to connect the resonance of Civil War brutality to the wars at the very end of the twentieth century. Next, he focuses on the Philippine Insurgency (1899-1902) and Vietnam, attempting to show the same principles of making war on civilians. To be sure, brutality existed in both of these wars, but their inclusion is odd, since insurgencies are held by many military historians to be fundamentally different from conventional conflicts, and Carr himself concludes, the particular hellishness of the Vietnam War owed more to the more recent innovation of US counterinsurgency strategies than it did to Sherman's campaigns (p. 160). US counterinsurgency strategy in Viet-

nam was founded on a wholly different conception of warfare rooted in Mao's idea of people's war, wherein the population was thought to be the sea in which the [insurgent] fish swims. This idea was long a part of the colonial war experience and carried over into the US Marines *Small Wars Manual* of 1940 and the writings of professional officers such as David Galula and Roger Trinquier. But in Vietnam, the United States faced both an insurgency by the externally supported Viet Cong and division-sized elements of the North Vietnamese Army.

This is the likely reason that Carr cites Sherman as a ghost rather than as a direct influencer, but to ascribe the whole of the nature of the Vietnam War to the United States, ignoring actions by North Vietnam, or even the actions of the regime in the South, or Chinese and Soviet actions, seems forced. The sections on these two wars is very disappointing, as Carr seems to abandon his balanced reason of the first half in favor of a passion that detracts sharply from the book's strength. The sections on strategic bombing campaigns during the Second World War, culminating in the dropping of the two atomic bombs, are surprisingly short. Panama attracts his attention, but rather than taking the conflict, as many Americans do, as evidence that the United States had grown beyond the Vietnam Syndrome, Carr emphasizes casualties among Panamanians and the action's failures without discussing the successes, a tendency that he continues throughout the book's second half. He concludes that the increased precision of post-Vietnam war through precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and drones is a fateful and bloody extension of Clausewitz's definition of war, quoting, In such dangerous things as war, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst (p. 250). Carr sees no benevolence in his new American way of war.

The book's pace quickens as the author discusses Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan. The text is much less well documented here, which is unfortunate because Carr makes significant accusations, referring, for example, to the global deployment of special forces death squads (p. 255) without citation and asserting, again without citation, that any male behaving suspiciously in certain areas acquires signatures that qualify him for killing (p. 272). The second claim in particular contradicts this reviewer's experience in Afghanistan (2011-12), where extensive validation requirements stayed the hand of drone operators, even against combatants who had just fired on American forces and who were miles away from the nearest civilian. Doubtless there were areas where a more free-fire atmosphere prevailed, at dif-

ferent times and under specific command climates, but the author lumps all such situations together and dismisses significant efforts by the command, American and allied, to mitigate civilian harm.

The author stacks estimated casualty figures one atop the other, and while he sometimes questions the potential accuracy of such hearsay figures, he includes them still, resting part of his case on the supposition that they *might* be true. This insinuating technique stands in stark contrast to his careful scholarship in the first half of the book. These figures are punctuated with several accounts from soldiers that seem to underscore deliberate or careless American brutality in the field, but he makes no effort to qualify these accounts or to establish them as representative.

Carr's highly selective reading represents an important perspective on American military actions; his work

echoes what many critics of the American military assert, that precision-guided munitions and remote control warfare have exacerbated and encouraged a resort to targeted killing as part of war, making it more hellish under the power of precision technology. Carr makes good points about the troubling issue of killing by remote control, about the importance of perception and psychology in modern warfare, and about the difficulty in realizing the ideal of less destructive methods of state-based coercion discussed by some war theorists. Carr asks what war has become in the age of high technology and globalization, and it is a question that any thinking person should consider. For Carr, Sherman was indeed right when he uttered his famous phrase that war is hell, and he finds the modern American way of war hellish in a way that Sherman's ghost may appreciate and endorse.

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