

## **Sherman's Demons**

*By Michael Fellman*

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By the end of the Civil War, William T. Sherman was one of the most important and celebrated Union commanders, and the most reviled in the Confederacy. During the last year of the conflict, his army conquered Atlanta, reversing a flagging Union war effort and securing Abraham Lincoln's re-election. After that his men scorched much of Georgia in his famous March to the Sea, then cut a huge swath up through the Carolinas. Not only did his army destroy men and material, but Sherman articulated a ruthless policy of destruction that deeply demoralized Southern morale. He gained perpetual infamy in the South as the grim reaper of the Union war effort, a task he undertook quite consciously, with both anger and joy.

Yet, as few Americans know, during the first year of the war, on Nov. 9, 1861, General Sherman, paralyzed by depression, was relieved of his command in Kentucky at his own request. Five weeks later, the wire services proclaimed to the nation: GENERAL WILLIAM T. SHERMAN INSANE. Just after his participation in the Civil War had begun, Sherman's service was nearly destroyed.

As all students of the war know, he came back and soared to prominence, but his mental collapse and his recovery, unusually well documented, present a riveting example of the understanding of depressive illness in the Victorian world, and the relationship of bipolar illness to creativity and inspired leadership during difficult times, which Sherman certainly demonstrated later in the war.

As was true of Ulysses S. Grant, Sherman's prewar life had careened from failure to failure. But where Grant self-medicated his frustrations with drink and retreated into stoic silence, Sherman experienced erratic emotional ups and downs that he shared with his friends and family in a manner that only intensified his self-laceration.

Grant and Sherman were both members of the broad cohort of West Point-trained officers who would populate the upper echelons of the

war's opposing armies. But while others, including Grant, had fought heroic wars in Mexico, Sherman stewed in California, where most of his troops deserted his unit for the lures of the gold fields. Later, out of the Army, although backed by the powerful political forces of his family and wealthy supporters in St. Louis, his bank failed in San Francisco in the Panic of 1857. Subsequently, he bounced forlornly around Kansas and Ohio, achieving little worldly success.

When the war began, Sherman resigned his recently assumed presidency of the Louisiana military academy (which would become Louisiana State University), ran a streetcar line in St. Louis, very badly, and finally took command of a brigade at Bull Run that collapsed in the face of the Confederate advance. Nevertheless, in mid-August, 1861, he was assigned to be second in command of the Army of the Cumberland, in Kentucky, a slaveholding, divided state, and the key to what would become of the Western theater — and perhaps of the Union itself.

Throughout the first six months of the war, Sherman's psyche was dominated by self-doubt and fear. In fact, when he was assigned to Kentucky, he informed Abraham Lincoln of his "extreme desire to serve in a subordinate capacity, and in no event to be left in a superior command." This reticence astounded Lincoln, who was far more used to braggart officers demanding important commands; but it was not modesty that led Sherman to his demonstration of uncertainty. Then, on Oct. 5, his superior, Robert Anderson (the commander at Fort Sumter when the war began) resigned because of health issues, almost certainly including major depression. Three days later, Sherman replaced him. Sherman lasted a tormented month before he was removed.

The day he took over, following a reconnaissance into the Kentucky hinterland, Sherman wrote anxiously to civilian supporters, and to Lincoln as well, that the whole countryside seethed with disunion, that the enemy was conspiring to create a "vast force" that would soon overwhelm Louisville. His own units were green, "too weak, far too weak" to resist the expected onslaught. he anticipated being "overwhelmed" — a defeat that would be "disastrous to the nation. Do not conclude...that I exaggerate the facts. They are as stated, and the future looks as dark as possible. It would be better if a more sanguine mind were here, for I am forced to order according to my expectations."

This was hardly the self-confidence one needs in leaders. And one can only imagine the degree to which Sherman dismayed others serving under him.

Thoroughly alarmed, Lincoln dispatched his secretary of war, Simon Cameron, to make a personal inspection. On Oct. 17, Sherman repeated these apprehensions to Cameron, and insisted that only a force of 200,000 men could hold Kentucky. Cameron replied that he was astonished by this analysis and that he had no idea where such an army might come from. And despite telling Sherman that he was among friends during this interview, Cameron had included Samuel Wilkerson of the New York Tribune in his party, who would later write the story declaring Sherman insane.

The other Union generals in Kentucky whom Cameron and Lincoln consulted assured them that the Confederate side was even more disorganized than they were, and that they did not share Sherman's negative certainties, which amounted, they were certain, to delusions.

Over the following weeks, Sherman's fears only intensified, while others observed a tortured man suffering what has long been defined in psychiatric terms as intense mania. For example, two sympathetic New York journalists who shared long nights at the Louisville telegraph office with the general grew deeply alarmed by his behavior. Sherman talked incessantly while never listening, all the while repeatedly making "quick, sharp...odd gestures," pacing the floor, chain-smoking cigars, "twitching his red whiskers — his coat buttons — playing a tattoo on the table" with his fingers. All in all he was "a bundle of nerves all strung to their highest tension." Back at his hotel, other guests observed him pacing all night in the corridors, smoking and brooding, "and it was soon whispered about that he was suffering from mental depression." Such increased energy, talkativeness and hyperactivity (which can sometimes become impulsive and even psychotic), is the definition of mania, the twin — and opposite — of depression in the illness of bipolar disorder.

In letters to his wife, Ellen Ewing Sherman, Sherman himself confirmed and amplified what others observed. Everyone around him seemed poised to betray him, he wrote her. "I am up all night." He had lost his appetite. Viewing his situation from the perspective of this mental turmoil, he was convinced that he was caught in an impossible military

contradiction where “to advance would be madness and to stand still folly.” And he entirely lacked the means to lead others and to control himself: “I find myself riding a whirlwind unable to guide the storm.” In the near future he anticipated total “failure and humiliation,” an onrushing infamy that “nearly makes me crazy — indeed I may be so now.”

Then, on Nov. 8, a captain on Sherman’s staff telegraphed to ask her to come down to relieve him from the pressures of business. In a series of letters to the extended Ewing/Sherman clan over the next week, Ellen described what she found in Louisville: understanding that depression had what we would now call a genetic predisposition, she recalled that one of Sherman’s uncles was a chronic “melancholic.” And she also remembered quite vividly “having seen Cump [his boyhood nickname] in the seize of it in California,” when the bank had failed, a mental event that was repeated at least twice prior to the war. To inheritance and personal history, Ellen Sherman added descriptions of his behavior: he seldom ate or slept, had lost human contact with others, and scarcely talked unless repeating his obsessions that “the whole country is gone irrevocably & ruin & desolation are at hand.”

Sherman was relieved of his command on Nov. 8 and reassigned to a lesser post in St. Louis. When the downward spiral continued, Ellen Sherman came to collect him on Dec. 1, for three weeks’ leave back home in Lancaster, Ohio. There she began to nurse him back to health with a rest cure, the frequently effective 19th-century therapy: favorite foods, reading him his most cherished books, especially Shakespeare, and calming him sufficiently so that he could sleep. The real cure, as in all bipolar illness, is nature: the average mood episode rarely lasts longer than six months before it goes into remission by itself.

Despite the public’s awareness of his insanity, Sherman seemed somewhat strengthened by the time he returned to St. Louis on Dec. 19. His bipolar illness seems to have bottomed out, and he undertook a lengthy period of self-repair. Henry Halleck, Sherman’s commander, who understood and sympathized with Sherman’s inner turmoil, and also valued his intelligence and training, soon placed him in charge of the training camp in St. Louis under his direct supervision. Seven weeks later, trusting Sherman’s recovery sufficiently, Halleck assigned him to

Cairo, Ill., to serve as the logistical coordinator for Grant's army, the beginning of a long and intense friendship between two emotionally wounded warriors. Grant soon brought Sherman down to the front at Pittsburg Landing, Tenn., and put him in charge of a division.

There, on April 6, a vast surprise attack on Grant's army led to the horrific Battle of Shiloh, in which the casualties totaled 20,000 men. In the thick of things, Sherman led his men with considerable personal bravery and tactical skill. Following this battle, his spirits soared. He experienced an almost instant internal transformation: from the despairing, self-proclaimed loser in Kentucky to the confident and brilliantly creative commander who would do so much, in word as well as deed, to destroy the Confederacy.

*Sources: Michael Fellman, "Citizen Sherman"; Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., "Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865"; Nassir Ghaemi, "A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness."*

*Michael Fellman is professor emeritus of history at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. He is the author of several volumes on the American Civil War, as well as the forthcoming "Views from the Dark Side of American History." He would like to acknowledge the careful reading given this essay by Dr. Nassir Ghaemi, professor of psychiatry and director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts University.*