

Politics and Destruction Threaten the Confederacy

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In preparation for his “March to the Sea”, on September 7, 1864, General William Sherman ordered the residents living in Atlanta, Georgia, to evacuate the city. He wrote “I have deemed it to the interest of the United States that the citizens now residing in Atlanta should remove, those who prefer it to go south and the rest north.” Between September 11 and 20, 446 families totaling about 1600 people, left their homes and possessions to flee the city. Sherman felt that the residents of Atlanta were only more mouths to feed, in addition to feeding his army, and did not want to be held responsible for the repercussions of women and children living in the midst of his army and its operations.

Given that Sherman was an advocate of “hard war”, he held no sympathy for the protests and complaints of the residents living in Atlanta. He was seeking to destroy the South’s psychological and economic will to resist, and was mounting a campaign to eliminate any resources and possessions that could be used by the Confederate forces. Factories, railroad and farms at the heart of the Confederacy provided Confederate troops with necessities, and if he could destroy these things, the Confederate war effort would hopefully collapse. Sherman’s ultimate goal in his “March to the Sea” was to get to Savannah, which he hoped to present to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift if he succeeded.

In Orange, New Jersey, War Democrat General George McClellan formally accepted the Democratic Nomination for President. McClellan was not in support of the “peace plank” platform of the Democratic Party, which called for a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement to end the Civil War. He instead vowed to manage the Union war effort more efficiently than his rival

Abraham Lincoln. "The Union is the one condition of peace," he said, and he stressed that the ending of aggressions should rest on the re-establishment of the Union. Some would argue that the Democratic nominations were contradicting. The party platform called for peace and an immediate end to the war, which vice president nominee George Pendleton advocated, while McClellan wanted to continue the conflict. Regardless of McClellan's stand, Republican tactics centered on Peace Democrats and their disloyalty, and portrayed McClellan as associating with their side of the party. The capture of Atlanta in early September greatly improved northern morale and provided Lincoln with considerable support.

In the Shenandoah, Lincoln was distressed over what he called a "dead lock". Neither Sheridan nor Early appeared to be making any progress towards Winchester. Fighting finally increased in the Shenandoah with action at Bunker Hill near Berryville. General Robert Anderson left Winchester and returned to Lee's army at Petersburg, where help was needed to fight against Grant's siege lines. The departure of Anderson to Lee severely diminished Early's force facing Sheridan. Early spread out his remaining troops from Winchester to Martinsburg. Once Sheridan heard of Anderson's departure to join Lee's army, and the raid on Martinsburg, he decided to attack while the Confederate army was spread out.

Grant headed north from the Petersburg siege lines to talk about future action in the Shenandoah with Sheridan. Grant's purpose for the meeting was to have Sheridan attack Early, or at least push them out of the valley, and destroy that source of supplies for Lee's army. Sheridan knew the positions of his army, and of the enemy, and was confident of his success. Later in the week, Sheridan would begin his campaign against Early, marching his army towards Winchester on the Winchester-Berryville Pike. The Valley of Virginia was about to suffer.