

Is Total War Justified?

Sherman lobbed 100,000 shells into the city of Atlanta during the summer in 1864. This attack on civilian areas was a part of President Lincoln's "total war" strategy, carried out near the end of the war. It was considered to be unethical (and still is) to attack property or people who are not directly a part of the war. For example, it is okay to bomb an ammunition



factory since it produces war materials, but it is not okay to bomb a person's house or some other private property. But Lincoln reasoned that attacking civilians and their property was necessary because: a) civilians contribute to the war effort by growing food etc., and b) destroying the morale of Confederate soldiers and their families would bring a quick end to the war. Lincoln believed that what the nation really needed was an end to war, so he authorized attacks like these. The capture of Atlanta had a huge impact on the war and on the country. Due to Lincoln's renewed popularity, he was re-elected. His opponent, George McClellan, had pledged to end the war by allowing the South to secede. After Sherman and his troops set fire to what was left of Atlanta, they marched through Georgia to Savannah on what is now known as the "March to the Sea." The effect of the march on civilians along the way was particularly brutal (crops burned, animals slaughtered), but it did help bring about the end of the war. Five months after leaving Atlanta, the Confederacy surrendered. How many more lives would have been sacrificed if the war had lasted longer?

After learning about the effect of Sherman's siege on Atlanta civilians, do you think "total war" was the right strategy to use? As a class explore this ethical question.