On the 11th of June 1863, Union troops entered the town of Darien, Georgia, a small but prosperous community of about five hundred people that was the state's second most important port. Col. Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the black 54th Massachusetts regiment, described Darien as a "beautiful little town." Soon, however, Shaw and his regiment were helping set the town ablaze. The man who ordered the town burned was Shaw's superior officer, Col. James Montgomery, a Kansas Jayhawker and the leader of the 2nd South Carolina, a regiment consisting of former slaves. Before he burned the town, Montgomery—who had applied the match to one of the buildings himself—said that secession must be "swept away by the hand of God, like the Jews of old."

Confederates, predictably, were appalled by the burning of Darien. The *Savannah News* said it was a "crowning act of wanton vandalism." Citizens were especially angered because "negro thieves" had destroyed their town. The news of the burning even made it to camps in the Army of Northern Virginia. One general marching with Lee's men noted that in contrast to what Montgomery's troops did to Darien, Confederates in Pennsylvania acted humane.

Many northerners were also appalled by the destruction of Darien. Democratic newspapers saw the burning of the town as further proof that abolitionists had gone too far. And as it was happening, Robert Gould Shaw—as shown in the movie *Glory*—protested the orders to burn the town. In a letter to his

wife, Annie, Shaw described the incident as a “dirty piece of business,” “abominable,” and “barbarous.” Shaw, the son of prominent abolitionists, objected to the burning of Darien because he believed it violated the rules of warfare. For Shaw, Darien, which had been almost completely abandoned before Union troops arrived, was not a legitimate military target. It was not garrisoned; not the state capital; and had not been taken by force. Perhaps more important, Shaw opposed the burning of Darien because he thought it would reflect badly on his black soldiers, who had not yet fought the enemy. Shaw thought his regiment—and the cause of abolitionism—was best served by having African Americans fight in a conventional battle, not engage in partisan-style warfare.

Shaw’s opposition to the burning of Darien certainly represented one strain of abolitionism. After the war, Shaw’s family actually sent money to the residents of Darien to help them rebuild the town. Shaw was not alone in regretting the destruction of Darien. Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, another Massachusetts abolitionist in charge of black troops, said that “I will have none but civilized warfare in *my* reg’t, but the public may not discriminate.” Many northerners, however, did discriminate. The anti-slavery *Springfield Republican*, which was Republican in name as well as political leanings, denounced what it called the “sack of Darien” and said that the U.S. government should discipline men like Montgomery who laid waste to southern towns.

Historians have usually sided with Colonel Shaw's view of the burning of Darien, a tendency that the film *Glory*—as powerful and historically accurate as it is—has reinforced in the popular imagination. In 1959, the white supremacist historian E. Merton Coulter, the editor of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, wrote an article in *Civil War History* that called Montgomery a "barbarian" and compared him to Genghis Khan. Even Peter Burchard, who was more sympathetic to black Civil War troops, described the burning of Darien in his book *One Gallant Rush*, as a "grim, orgy of destruction." More recently, scholars have taken a more objective view of Darien. But a reassessment of the burning of town is necessary, a reassessment that views Montgomery's actions in the wider context of the northern war effort and the anti-slavery movement as a whole. Historian Keith Wilson, in an excellent article comparing colonels Shaw, Higginson, and Montgomery in the Department of the South, has said that when it came to the burning of Darien, "condemnation was not a universal response." It is my contention that not only was it not universal, there was considerable approval of Montgomery's actions among Massachusetts abolitionists.

Despite the caution of abolitionists like Shaw and Higginson, by the summer of 1863, there were abolitionists who believed that more unconventional and controversial means of attacking slavery were necessary to achieve emancipation and Union victory. Indeed, the more anti-slavery a Massachusetts newspaper, the

more likely one finds support for the burning of Darien, Georgia. The abolitionist *Boston Commonwealth*, for example, praised Montgomery's actions, saying that when it came to abolishing slavery, "burning and pillage are incident to this main objective." A war correspondent at the anti-slavery Boston *Traveller* newspaper said Darien was a "beautiful town, and never did it look so grand and beautiful as in its destruction." The *Traveller* correspondent believed the North should have no compunctions about such destruction, and concluded, "If we *must burn* the South out, so be it." The editors at the *Traveller* said of James Montgomery, "It is so seldom that we find a man on our side doing anything to distress the enemy."

The burning of Darien, if taken out of context, certainly might—as the film *Glory* suggests—put James Montgomery in a bad light. The film essentially depicts the colonel as a harsh, perhaps even deranged, man. Montgomery did not—as the film shows—shoot one of his own black soldiers after the man had fought with a white woman. But he did have a reputation for rough justice. He had fought in "Bleeding Kansas" before the Civil War broke out. And he was once an associate of John Brown, a man of similarly extreme abolitionist convictions. When he arrived in the Department of the South in 1863, Montgomery unsettled men like Shaw and Higginson with his "Western" style of fighting. For men from greater Boston, Montgomery's conduct of the war did not seem like fighting at all, but bushwhacking.

Yet by June 1863, the Department of the South had become a laboratory for abolitionist ideas. Montgomery might have employed unconventional methods, but he had the backing of his superior, the abolitionist David Hunter. And a few days before the burning of Darien, Montgomery had won praise from whites and blacks alike for his raid up the Combahee River in South Carolina. With help from Harriet Tubman, who served as a guide, Montgomery and his black troops freed 750 slaves and destroyed what was reported to be a million dollars in rebel property, all without the loss of a single man. The anti-slavery newspapers the Greenfield *Gazette& Courier* and the Worcester *Spy* both published a story on Montgomery's Combahee raid that called it one of the "most brilliant" of the war, and the anti-slavery Boston *Recorder* referred to Montgomery as the "Kansas hero."

Montgomery's harsh actions against civilians were not part of a personal vendetta against the South, but a manifestation of the Union's—and more so, abolitionists'—hard war policy against slaveholders. A few days before Montgomery set foot in Darien, the Union burned the town of Bluffton, South Carolina, after which, interestingly, there was no public outcry. Thus, it was a bit disingenuous for northerners and abolitionists to think Montgomery was doing anything especially evil. As a chronicler of the Hundred Years' War once said, "A war without fire is like sausages without mustard." And by June 1863, Civil War

armies had made it clear that civilians were targets, and that might mean they'd get their house burned down. especially if they were on a plantation.

The burning of Darien might seem only a footnote to the much bloodier and better publicized events of the summer of 1863. But the Union's destruction of the town highlighted a fundamental question among abolitionists, namely, did the ends of abolition justify the means? Some abolitionists had always been uncomfortable with using violence to end slavery. Obviously, the abolitionists who took part in the Darien raid were not pacifists. The abolitionist movement, however, began as a reform effort that embraced pacifism, especially among the Quakers. Abolitionists reminded Americans that slavery was based on physical coercion, whether it was the forced sale of slaves or the whipping of servants who had escaped or disobeyed their masters. Abolitionists hoped that by taking a stand against violence they could undermine the moral authority of the master class, and they looked to the New Testament's teachings about turning the other cheek and loving thy neighbor as thyself as core religious principles.

As the abolitionist movement gained followers, however, it also ran into ideological problems, among them the difficulty of maintaining a non-violent stance in the face of an aggressive, even militaristic "Slave Power." In the 1830s, William Lloyd Garrison caused a split in the abolitionist movement on the subject of non-violence. Garrison rejected violence completely. Even when he was

attacked by an anti-abolitionist mob in Boston in 1835, he chose not to fight back. However, the followers of Lewis Tappan, a New Yorker and head of the American Anti-Slavery Society, were more flexible on the subject of non-violence. Many Tappanites believed violence was morally acceptable were it used in self-defense.

By the time the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law, William Lloyd Garrison had been publishing *The Liberator* for decades, but slavery did not seem to be dying. Instead, it was thriving in the South, and it looked like it might have a prosperous future in formerly Mexican lands. Increasingly, abolitionists embraced violence as a means of eradicating human bondage. In the mid-1850s, Angelina Grimke, who was born in South Carolina but would die in Massachusetts, said, "baptize liberty in blood, if it must be so." Despite some abolitionists' embrace of New Testament teachings, as the nation began unraveling, there were anti-slavery leaders who began thinking more in Old Testaments terms, just as James Montgomery did.

John Brown's October 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, where he hoped to begin a slave revolt was unquestionably a failure. But for abolitionists, it was a strategic victory. It sent shockwaves through the South and gave a jolt to the abolitionist movement. Despite John Brown's capture and execution, abolitionists, more than ever, saw the appeal of violence to destroy the master class. Massachusetts native Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself an abolitionist, likened

Brown to Christ. William Lloyd Garrison also praised Brown, though Garrison did not abandon his non-violent principles. Instead, we see Garrison adopting an ambivalent attitude toward violence as a tool for emancipation. “I thank god,” Garrison said after Brown’s raid, “when men who believe in the right and duty of wielding carnal weapons are so far advanced that they will take those weapons out of the scale of despotism, and throw them into the scale of freedom.” Yet, Garrison did not say that he or his followers had a right to use violence. Instead, he maintained a stance that said violence was acceptable as long as someone else did it. And one of the men who did it was his son George Thompson Garrison, who served as an officer in the 55th Massachusetts (Colored) regiment.

We see Garrison’s ambivalence toward violence in his newspaper’s attention to the burning of Darien. *The Liberator* of 3 July 1863 did not include an editorial from its own staff, but it did include an editorial from the New York *Evening Post* on the subject. The *Post* defended Col. Montgomery’ actions, noting that not one Rebel civilian was harmed when the Union army burned Darien. Also, Montgomery’s burning of the town represented nothing worse than acts Confederates had committed elsewhere during the war.

The decision of *The Liberator* to not write an editorial defending the burning of Darien perfectly reflects Garrison’s view toward the war. Violence was acceptable, Garrison believed, because slaveholders had started the war and were

attacking civilians. Garrison was not going to grab a gun or sword himself, but he supported the Lincoln administration's prosecution of the war. Garrison was part of what Charles Royster has called the "vicarious war." In the case of the burning of Darien, Garrison used the words of the New York *Post* rather than his own to advocate a harsher war against the South. James Montgomery thought of himself as an instrument in the hands of God. And for many abolitionists, Montgomery was their instrument. A vicarious war, indeed.

Even among colonels Shaw and Higginson, who objected to the burning of Darien, we see them as part of the Union's "vicarious war." Shaw wrote the governor of Massachusetts in protest against Darien's burning. But Shaw personally did not dislike Montgomery; and he had no problems with the looting that preceded Darien's destruction. Shaw called Montgomery a "conscientious man" who had deep religious principles. And from a military point of view, Shaw also admired him, saying Montgomery had more energy than anyone else in his theatre of operations.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson frequently was critical of Montgomery, but he also called him a "genius." In his memoirs, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Higginson said that during the war, Montgomery's raids "reached the dignity of a fine art." Interestingly, Higginson and Montgomery had followed similar paths. Both had served in the Kansas before the war, and Higginson had secretly given

money to John Brown. Even before Darien's burning, Higginson was no stranger to the hard war against southern civilians. Higginson was in Jacksonville, Florida, when it was burned in March 1863. Higginson's men did not set fire to any buildings, but the colonel wrote that the flames gave the destruction a "Judgment-Day"-like atmosphere. His black troops did not protest the destruction, in fact they were singing as they moved out of Jacksonville. Thus, we see similarities between Colonel Montgomery's wrath against Darien and the Union's destruction of other towns in the southeastern Confederacy is instructive.

Among abolitionists like Shaw and Higginson, their objections to the burning of Darien had more to do with the issue of controlling their men than concern for southern towns or the supposed rules of warfare. Shaw worried that if his men engaged in plundering and attacking civilian targets, it would hurt unit morale and discipline. Northerners, Shaw feared, would never take black troops seriously if they acted like brigands. But of Shaw, Higginson, and Montgomery, Montgomery lasted the longest. Shaw was killed at Battery Wagner, and it was Montgomery who took charge of the 54th Massachusetts after him. Shaw, with the help of the Boston propaganda machine, would win glory in the history books. But it was Montgomery who continued the dirty work of campaigning deep within the Confederacy during the war.

Amid these campaigns, abolitionists were not simply eager to see the destruction of slavery, they wanted to impart a new set of values on the South. Massachusetts had always been the heart of abolitionism, a kind of anti-South Carolina. In her book *Patriot Fires,* Melinda Lawson has a chapter titled "'Until the Ideas of Massachusetts Kiss the Gulf of Mexico.'" Lawson's quotation is taken from a speech by Wendell Phillips, but the sentiment was shared by other abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass. Douglass—who spent a lot of time in Massachusetts throughout his career—hoped one day that the New England schoolhouse would one day replace the southern whipping post in the South.

In contrast to men like William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass believed violence was necessary to destroy human bondage. When asked about the Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass remarked, "The only way to make the fugitive slave law a dead letter . . . is to make a dozen or more dead kidnappers." Douglass, who had escaped from slavery, had no problem with the prospect of slaveholder corpses paving the way to liberty. In wartime, Douglass worked tirelessly to have President Lincoln enlist black soldiers as quickly as possible. And he had two sons who served in the army. One of them had enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts regiment and was present when Darien was burned. When it came to the destruction of Darien, Douglass defended Colonel Montgomery's actions. Since the Rebels violated the rules of warfare by refusing to acknowledge blacks as soldiers, Douglass asserted, they did

not deserved whatever men like Montgomery might dish out. It is safe to assume Douglass spoke for many African Americans when he praised Montgomery as a "wise man." When it came to the Rebels, Douglass quoted Scripture, saying that "whoever sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind."

When historians talk about abolitionists, they usually mean those who pursued traditional political outlets, such a running for office, voting, editorial writing, and attending rallies and speeches. But we could also call the soldiers in the 54th Massachusetts abolitionists. And they apparently saw Darien's burning as a fitting fate. George E. Stephens, a black soldier serving the 54th Massachusetts kept an objective tone when describing the destruction of Darien. Yet, he called Montgomery "active and brave" and noted that the plundering of Darien provided "many things of use and comfort." Once the destruction of Darien was complete, Stephens wrote how the 54th "steamed gaily down the river." His words hardly suggest much guilt over the burning of a Georgia town that clearly was the product of slaveholding wealth. James Henry Gooding, a black war correspondent for the abolitionist New Bedford *Mercury* had little sympathy for Darien. In contrast to Colonel Shaw and others, who remarked on the town's beauty, Gooding said that he had seen little more than "stink weed, sand, rattlesnakes, and alligators" since he had been in the area.

In conclusion, historians need to look closer at how abolitionists, especially those in Massachusetts, were the engine of the Union's hard war policy against the South. Viewed in the light of the Union's hard war policy against the Confederacy, Colonel Montgomery seems not an anomaly, but rather the right man for the job—a kind of William Tecumseh Sherman in miniature, a man who had no problem making sure southerners paid a high price for secession. Long before men like Grant or Sherman began waging war against civilians, abolitionists were hoping to crush the Confederacy by crushing slavery. The destruction of Darien in 1863 is not nearly as well known as the burning of Atlanta or Columbia, South Carolina. But it happened first, and it showed how far the abolitionist movement had come and how the destruction of slavery became the most destructive aspect of America's bloodiest war.