

WINNING THE WEST

THE ARMY IN THE INDIAN WARS

1865–1890

Perhaps because of a tendency to view the record of a military establishment in terms of conflict, the U.S. Army's operational experience in the quarter century following the Civil War has come to be known collectively as the Indian Wars, although those inhabitants of America described by the catchall name of Indian did not have anything like a monolithic culture or society. Previous struggles with various Indian tribes, dating back to colonial times, had generally been limited as to scope and opponent (the Pequot war in New England that virtually exterminated that tribe being one of the more notable exceptions) and took place in a period when the Indian could withdraw or be pushed into vast reaches of uninhabited and as yet unwanted territory to the west. By 1865 this safety valve was fast disappearing; routes of travel and pockets of settlement had multiplied across the western two-thirds of the nation, and as the Civil War closed Americans in greater numbers and with greater energy than before resumed the quest for land, gold, commerce, and adventure that had been largely interrupted by the war.

The showdown between the older Americans and the new, between two ways of life that were basically incompatible, was at hand. The besieged Indian, with an alien civilization pressing in and a main source of livelihood, the buffalo, threatened with extinction, was faced with a fundamental choice: surrender or fight. Many chose to fight, and over the course of twenty-five years the struggle ranged over the plains, mountains, and deserts of the American West, a small-scale war characterized by skirmishes, pursuits, massacres, raids, expeditions, battles, and campaigns of varying size and intensity. Given a central role in dealing with the Indian, the Army made a major contribution to conti-

mental consolidation and in the process shaped itself as a culture and as an institution in many ways.

The Setting and the Challenge

After Appomattox the Army had to muster out over a million volunteers and reconstitute a regular establishment that had languished during the Civil War when bounties and short enlistments made service in the volunteers more profitable. There were operational commitments to sustain during and after the transition, some an outgrowth of the war just ended and others the product of internal and external situations that could not be ignored. Whereas the prewar Army of the 1850s was essentially a frontier Army, the postwar Army became something more. To defense of the frontier were added military occupation of the southern states, neutralization of the Mexican border during Napoleon's colonial enterprise under Maximilian, elimination of a Fenian (Irish Brotherhood) threat to Canada in the Northeast, dispersion of white marauders in the border states, and a growing mission of coastal defense. But the mission of pacifying the frontier consumed much of the interest and attention of large numbers of Army officers and men in the years between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War.



*Artillery Helmet of the
Late Nineteenth Century*

Life in the Frontier Army

One of the determining factors about life in the U.S. Army on the frontiers of America was the small size of the force engaged in operations in relative isolation from the country and from the rest of the Army. The Army was scattered throughout hundreds of small forts, posts, outposts, and stations throughout the American West, often with little more than a company of cavalry or infantry in each post. This isolation bred, on one hand, a strong sense of camaraderie, of bonding, within the Army in a way that only shared suffering can do. The officers and men often felt part of an extended family that had to look inward for strength as it relied on its own customs, rituals, and sense of honor separate from that distant civilian world or even from the very different military society "back East." This sense of unity, of "splendid isolation," kept the Army as an institution together during the harsh missions of western frontier duty but at the same time led far too often to professional and personal stagnation. Promotion was slow, and chances for glory were few given the dangers and hardships of small-unit actions against an elusive foe.

The isolation also bred a certain measure of reliance upon each other, as officers and soldiers developed various customs and rituals to bring structure to their lives. The formal rituals of a frontier post—life regulated by bugle calls, formal parades, Saturday night dances for the officers, distinctive uniforms, and unit nicknames—were attempts to deal with the tensions and pressures of a harsh life for a soldier and his family with low pay and little prestige. While perhaps glamorous in retrospect, or when seen through the eye of Hollywood movies, such small communities also had their share of drunkenness, petty squabbles, corruption, arguments over rank and quarters, and other seemingly minor disputes so well known by any who have experienced life in small-town America. It was a life at once dangerous and monotonous, comradely

and isolated, professionally rewarding and stultifying. With low pay, poor quarters, an indifferent public, and a skilled foe that was at once feared, hated, and admired, the officers and men of the frontier Army seemed caught in a never-ending struggle with an elusive enemy and their environment. One historian summarized the Army post during this period on the frontier this way: “If one description could alone fit all frontier posts, it would be a monotonous routine relaxed only slightly by the color of periodic ceremony.” This shared culture created many of the institutional myths and customs that continue to influence the Army’s image of itself to this day.

The manpower strains of all the various missions after the Civil War plus manning all the frontier posts and stations badly strained the resources of a shrinking Regular Army. As the post–Civil War Army took shape, its strength began a decade of decline, dropping from an 1867 level of 57,000 to half that in 1876, then leveling off at an average of 26,000 for the remaining years up to the War with Spain. Effective strength always lay somewhere below authorized strength, seriously impaired by high rates of sickness and desertion, for example. Because the Army’s military responsibilities were of continental proportions, involving sweeping distances, limited resources, and far-flung operations, an administrative structure was required for command and control. The Army was, therefore, organized on a territorial basis, with geographical segments variously designated as divisions, departments, and districts. There were frequent modifications of organization, rearrangements of boundaries, and transfers of troops and posts to meet changing conditions. (*See Map 35.*)

Development of a basic defense system in the trans-Mississippi West had followed the course of empire. Territorial acquisition and exploration succeeded by emigration and settlement brought the settlers increasingly into collision with the Indians and progressively raised the need for military posts along the transcontinental trails and in settled areas.

The annexation of Texas in 1845, the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute in 1846, and the successful conclusion of the Mexican War with the cession to the United States in 1848 of vast areas of land all had drawn the outlines of the major task facing the Army in the West in the middle of the nineteenth century. During the period between the Mexican and Civil Wars, the Army had established a reasonably comprehensive system of forts to protect the arteries of travel and areas of settlement across the frontier. At the same time the Army had launched operations against Indian tribes that represented actual or potential threats to movement and settlement.

Militarily successful in some cases, these operations nevertheless hardened Indian opposition, prompted wider provocations on both sides, and led to the delineation of an Indian barrier to westward expansion extending down the Great Plains from the Canadian to the Mexican border. Brig. Gen. William S. Harney, for example, responded to the Sioux massacre of Lt. John L. Grattan’s detachment with a punishing attack on elements of that tribe on the Blue Water in Nebraska in 1855. Farther south, Col. Edwin V. Sumner hit the Cheyennes on the Solomon Fork in Kansas in 1857 and Bvt. Maj. Earl Van Dorn fought the Comanches in two successful battles, at Rush Spring in future Oklahoma and Crooked Creek in Kansas in 1858 and 1859, respectively.

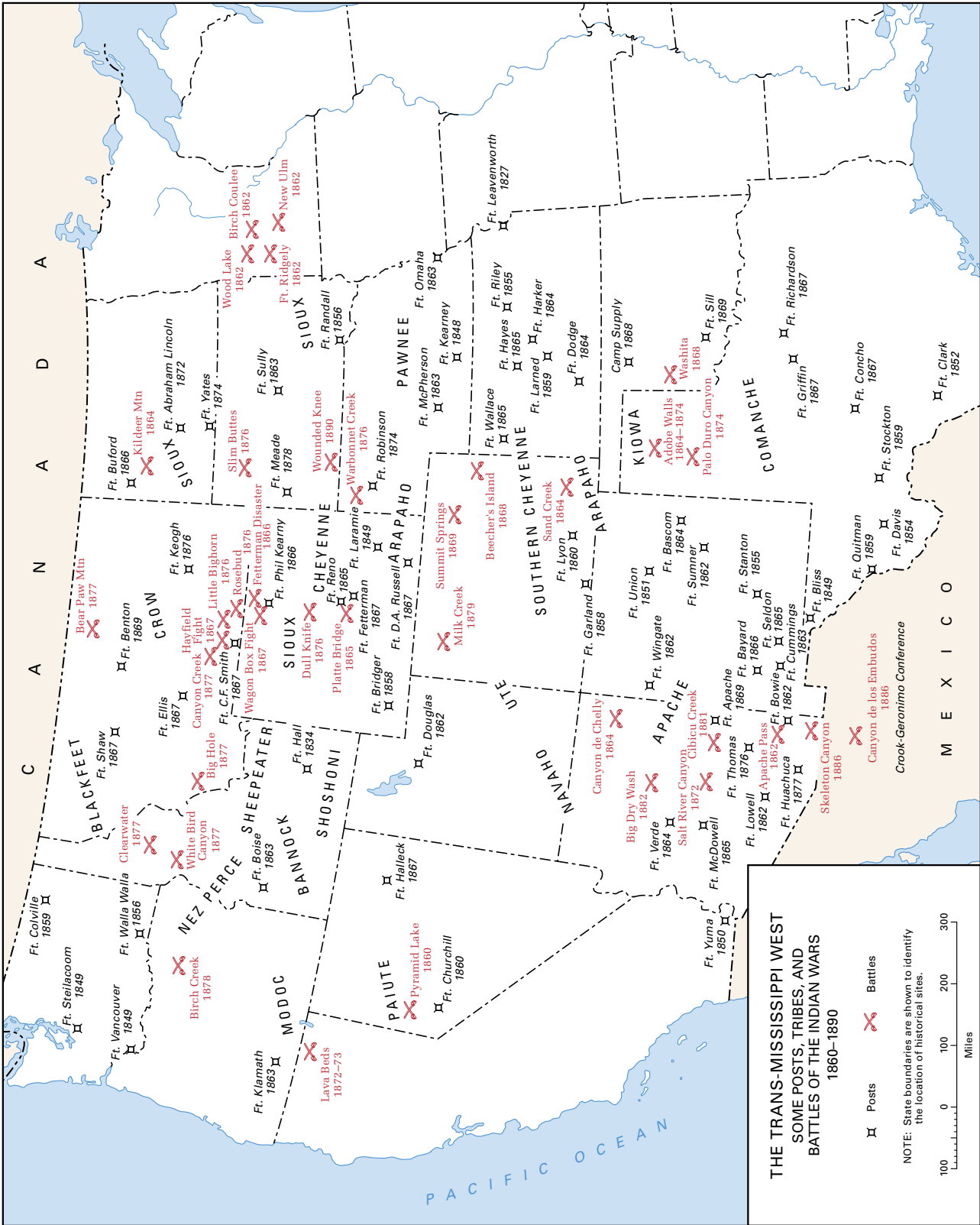
The Army on the Great Plains found itself in direct contact with a highly mobile and warlike culture that was not easily subdued.

In the Southwest, between the wars, Army units pursued Apaches and Utes in New Mexico Territory, clashing with the Apaches at Cieneguilla and Rio Caliente in 1854 and the Utes at Poncha Pass in 1855. There were various expeditions against branches of the elusive Apaches that involved hard campaigning but few conclusive engagements such as the one at Rio Gila in 1857. It was in this region in 1861 that Lt. George N. Bascom moved against Chief Cochise, precipitating events that opened a quarter century of hostilities with the Chiricahua Apaches.

In the Northwest, where numerous small tribes existed, there were occasional hostilities between the late 1840s and the middle 1860s. Their general character was similar to operations elsewhere: settler intrusion, Indian reaction, and U.S. Army or local militia counteraction with superior force. The more important events involved the Rogue River Indians in Oregon between 1851 and 1856 and the Yakima, Walla Walla, Cayuse, and other tribes on both sides of the Cascade Mountains in Washington in the latter half of the 1850s. The Army, often at odds with civil authority and public opinion in the area, found it necessary on occasion to protect Indians from settlers as well as the other way around.

The Regular Army's frontier mission was interrupted by the onset of the Civil War, and the task of dealing with the Indians was transferred to the volunteers. Although the Indians demonstrated an awareness of what was going on and took some satisfaction from the fact that their enemies were fighting each other, there is little evidence that they took advantage of the transition period between removal of the regulars and deployment of the volunteers. The so-called Great Sioux Uprising in Minnesota in 1862 that produced active campaigning in the Upper Missouri River region in 1863 and 1864 was spontaneous, and other clashes around the West were the result not of the withdrawal of the Regular Army from the West but of the play of more fundamental and established forces. The volunteer units were in many instances commanded by men of a very different stamp than were Regular Army units. In one instance, a Colorado volunteer cavalry unit, commanded by a volunteer colonel named John M. Chivington, attacked and massacred several hundred peaceful Cheyenne Indians at Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864 in one the worst atrocities of the western wars. There were dangers in relying on volunteer units in this essential peacekeeping role. In any case, by 1865 overall Army strength in the frontier departments was about double what it had been in 1861. The volunteers kept pace with a continuing and gradually enlarging westward movement by further developing the system of forts their predecessors had begun.

The regional defense systems established in the West in the 1850s and 1860s provided a framework for the deployment of the Army as it returned from the Civil War to its frontier responsibilities. In the late summer of 1866 the general command and administrative structure for frontier defense comprised the Division of the Missouri, containing the Departments of Arkansas, Missouri, Dakota, and the Platte; the Division of the Pacific, consisting of the Departments of California and the Columbia; and the independent Department of the Gulf, whose area included Texas. However, by 1870 the Division of the Pacific included



Map 35

the Departments of the Columbia, California, and Arizona and the Department of the Missouri covered the Departments of the Dakota, the Platte, and the Missouri; the Department of Texas was included in the Division of the South.

The Army's challenge in the West was one of environment as well as adversary, and in the summer of 1866 General Grant sent a number of senior-officer inspectors across the country to observe and report on conditions. The theater of war was uninhabited or only sparsely settled, and its great distances and extreme variations of climate and geography accentuated manpower limitations, logistical and communications problems, and the difficulties of movement. The extension of the rail system only gradually eased the situation. Above all, the mounted tribes of the Plains were a different breed from the Indians the Army had dealt with previously in the forested areas of the East. Despite the fact that the Army had fought Indians in the West in the period after the Mexican War, much of the direct experience of its officers and men had been lost during the Civil War years. Until frontier proficiency could be reestablished the Army would depend on the somewhat intangible body of knowledge that marks any institution, fortified by the seasoning of the Civil War.

Of the officers who moved to the forefront of the Army in the Indian Wars, few had frontier and Indian experience. At the top levels at the outset, Grant had had only a taste of the loneliness of the frontier outpost as a captain. William T. Sherman had served in California during the 1850s but had not been involved in fighting. Philip H. Sheridan had served about five years in the Northwest as a junior officer, but neither Nelson A. Miles nor Oliver O. Howard had known frontier service of any kind. Wesley Merritt, George A. Custer, and Ranald S. Mackenzie all had graduated from West Point into the Civil War; and John Gibbon had only minor involvement in the Seminole War and some garrison duty in the West. Alfred Sully, also a veteran of the Seminole War and an active campaigner against the Sioux during Civil War years, fell into obscurity, while Philip St. George Cooke was overtaken by age and Edward R. S. Canby's experience was lost prematurely through his death at Indian hands. Christopher Augur, Alfred H. Terry, and George Crook were among the few upper-level Army leaders of the Indian Wars that had pre-Civil War frontier experience.

Thus, to a large degree the officers of the Indian Wars were products of the Civil War. Many brought outstanding records to the frontier, but this was a new conflict against an unorthodox enemy. Those who approached their new opponent with respect and learned his ways became the best Indian-fighters and in some cases the most helpful in promoting a solution to the Indian problem. Some who had little respect for the "savages" and placed too much store in Civil War methods and achievements paid the penalty on the battlefield. Capt. William J. Fetterman would be one of the first to fall as the final chapter of the Indian Wars opened in 1866.

The Bozeman Trail

While the Civil War was still in progress, gold was discovered in Montana and fortune seekers flocked to the area. Lines of communica-

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tions to the fields around Virginia City lay along circuitous routes, and pressure mounted for more direct access. The Army explored the possibilities and adopted a route, pioneered by John Bozeman, extending from Fort Laramie on the North Platte River and Oregon Trail, northwestward along the eastern base and around the northern shoulder of the Big Horn Mountains. Unfortunately, the trail cut through hunting grounds that a treaty in 1865 had reserved for the Sioux, Northern Cheyennes, and Arapahos.

The Indians resisted white incursions, and Maj. Gen. Patrick E. Connor's Powder River Expedition failed to stop their depredations. In 1866 the government, under public pressure and attracted to the gold resources as a means of relieving the financial strains of the Civil War, opened new negotiations but with indifferent results. A few friendly chiefs signed a new agreement at Fort Laramie, but others led by Red Cloud of the Sioux stalked out defiantly when Col. Henry B. Carrington marched in with a battalion of the 18th Infantry on his way to establish posts along the Bozeman Trail even before agreement with the Indians had been reached.

Although motivated by a sense of justice, treaty-making with the Indians more often than not constituted an exercise in futility for both parties. On the Indian side the tribes were loosely knit societies of individualists living a nomadic existence under leaders whose control and influence fluctuated with the fortunes of war. A treaty was no more binding than the degree of power, authority, and allegiance a leader might muster at any given time, Washington's understanding to the contrary. On the U.S. side, although the authority of negotiating officials was unquestioned, the power to enforce treaty provisions on highly independent settlers was another matter, and as breach after breach provoked the Indian to action, the Army was invariably called in to protect the offending citizens and punish the Indians, almost regardless of which group was at fault.

Colonel Carrington's battalion of 700 men departed Fort Laramie in June 1866 for the Big Horn country. Despite Red Cloud's threat to oppose the move, several families, including the commanding officer's, accompanied the force. At Fort Reno on the Powder River, some miles beyond the end of the telegraph, Carrington with a regular company relieved two companies of the 5th U.S. Volunteers, former Confederate prisoners who became so-called galvanized Yankees when they agreed

GALVANIZED YANKEES

During the last year of the Civil War, Plains Indian warfare reached a crescendo as more and more white travelers passed through the tribes' hunting territory. To keep the routes open, the Union Army recruited six regiments of Confederate prisoners of war out of the prison camps in the North. Those who signed up were mostly landless "poor whites" and immigrants who had been drafted into the Confederate Army and were disillusioned with the Southern cause. Swapping Confederate gray for Union blue, these "Galvanized Yankees" (so nicknamed after the process to cover metal with a rust-resistant zinc coating) garrisoned forts on major transportation routes until the Regular Army arrived to take their place in 1866.

to frontier Indian service in exchange for their freedom. Farther northwest, 225 miles from Fort Laramie, Carrington selected a site on the Piney tributary of the Powder River to construct his headquarters post, Fort Phil Kearny. Five companies remained there while the other two were sent another ninety miles out to establish Fort C. F. Smith at the northern edge of the Big Horns.

Fort Phil Kearny became the focus of enemy attention and during its brief existence remained in a virtual state of siege. On December 21, 1866, the Indians attacked a wood train six miles from the fort. Captain Fetterman, who had been brevetted a lieutenant colonel in Civil War actions and now boasted that with eighty men he could ride through the whole Sioux Nation, asked to lead a relief column. Indian decoys demonstrated invitingly before the rescue party, withdrawing gradually over Lodge Trail Ridge northwest of the post. Fetterman fell for the ruse and against Carrington's orders crossed the ridge with eighty men at his back. In a carefully executed ambush the Indians wiped out the entire force, including two civilians who had gone along to try out their new Henry repeating rifles, weapons far superior to the Springfield muzzle-loaders carried by the infantrymen and the Spencer carbines carried by the cavalrymen in the detail.

The Army was more successful in two other notable actions on the Bozeman Trail. In August 1867 the Indians launched separate but apparently coordinated attacks against a haying detail near Fort Smith and a wood detail outside Fort Kearny. In the Hayfield Fight 19 soldiers and 6 civilians under Lt. Sigismund Sternberg, equipped with converted breechloading Springfields and several repeating rifles, held off vastly superior odds with a loss of only 3 killed and 2 wounded. In the Wagon Box Fight, Capt. James Powell, with 31 men similarly armed and stationed behind wagon boxes removed from their running gear, held off a much larger force of Sioux and Cheyennes for a good four hours, withstanding mounted and dismounted attacks by several hundred warriors at various times, with only 6 killed and 2 wounded.

It is risky to deal in statistics concerning Indian participation and casualties in western campaigns. Accounts vary widely, are founded on shaky evidence, and require some balancing and juggling merely to reach a general order of magnitude, much less an accurate assessment of the facts in a given situation. There is no doubt that the Sioux and Cheyennes suffered serious casualties in the Hayfield and Wagon Box fights. For the Army, however, these were defensive engagements; it lacked sufficient force in the Upper Plains to undertake offensive operations. At the same time there was sentiment in the East to treat with rather than chastise the Indians. The government withdrew the garrisons and abandoned the Montana road in July 1868.

The Southern Plains

The Army during the Indian Wars was habitually unable to balance resources with requirements, both because of limited manpower and because of the continental size of the theater of operations. As Lt. Gen. William T. Sherman, commanding the Division of the Missouri, aptly expressed the challenge:

Were I or the department commanders to send guards to every point where they are clamored for, we would need alone on the plains a hundred thousand men, mostly of cavalry. Each spot of every road, and each little settlement along five thousand miles of frontier, wants its regiment of cavalry or infantry to protect it against the combined power of all the Indians, because of the bare possibility of their being attacked by the combined force of all the Indians.

It was the good fortune of both the Army and the citizen in the West that the Indians rarely acted in concert within or between tribes, although had they done so the Army might have been able to regularly employ large units instead of dispersing troops in small detachments all over the frontier and might also have had better luck in forcing its elusive opponents to stand and fight. But troops and units were at a premium, so much so in 1868 that Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan decided to try an unusual expedient to carry out his responsibilities in the Department of the Missouri.

Sheridan directed Maj. George A. Forsyth to “employ fifty first-class hardy frontiersmen, to be used as scouts against the hostile Indians, to be commanded by yourself.” Recruited at Forts Harker and Hays in Kansas, the command took the field in late August in a region frequented by Comanches, Kiowas, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahos, augmented by some Sioux roaming south of the Platte. The tribes were restive: The Kansas Pacific Railroad was advancing through their country, frightening the buffalo—their source of food, clothing, and shelter—and attracting white settlement. The Cheyennes were still smoldering over the massacre of 200 of Black Kettle’s peaceful band, including women and children, by Col. John M. Chivington and his Colorado volunteers on Sand Creek in 1864 and had demonstrated their mistrust of the whites when Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock penetrated their area with a large expedition in 1867.

Forsyth and the Indians collided on the Arickaree Fork of the Republican River at dawn on November 17, 1868, when a combined war party of 600 Cheyennes, Sioux, and Arapahoes attacked him in a defensive position on a small island in the riverbed. The Indians pressed the fight for three days, wounding Forsyth and fifteen of his scouts and killing his second in command, Lt. Frederick H. Beecher, his surgeon, and four other soldiers. Among Indian casualties in this Battle of Beecher Island was the influential Cheyenne leader Roman Nose. The first rescue force on the scene was Capt. Louis H. Carpenter’s company of black troopers of the 10th Cavalry.

By the late 1860s the government’s policy of removing Indians from desirable areas, graphically represented by the earlier transfer of the Five Civilized Tribes from the Southeast to Oklahoma (the Cherokees called it the Trail of Tears), had run its course and was succeeded by one of concentrating them on reservations. The practice of locating tribes in other than native or salubrious surroundings and of joining uncongenial bands led to more than one Indian war. Some bands found it convenient to accept reservation status and government rations during the winter months, returning to the warpath and hunting trail in the milder seasons. Many bands of many tribes refused to accept the treaties offered by a peace commission and resisted the government’s at-

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tempt to confine them to specific geographical limits; it fell to the Army to force compliance. In his area, General Sheridan now planned to hit the Indians in their permanent winter camps.

While a winter campaign presented serious logistical problems, it offered opportunities for decisive results. If the Indians' shelter, food, and livestock could be destroyed or captured, not only the warriors but their women and children were at the mercy of the Army and the elements, and there was little left but surrender. These tactics, amounting to the total destruction of the Indian culture, raised certain moral questions for many officers and men that were never satisfactorily resolved.

Sheridan devised a plan whereby 3 columns would converge on the Indian wintering grounds just east of the Texas Panhandle: 1 from Fort Lyon in Colorado, 1 from Fort Bascom in New Mexico, and 1 from Camp Supply in the Indian Territory later to be called Oklahoma. The 7th Cavalry under Lt. Col. George A. Custer fought the major engagement of the campaign. Custer found the Indians on the Washita River and struck Black Kettle's Cheyenne village with eleven companies and from four directions at dawn on November 29, 1868, as the regimental band played "Gerry Owen," still the 7th Cavalry's regimental song. A fierce fight developed, which the Indians continued from surrounding terrain. By midmorning Custer learned that this was only one of many villages of Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, and Comanches extending for miles along the Washita. Facing such odds, Custer hastened to destroy the village and its supplies and, notably, about 875 ponies and horses; used an offensive maneuver to deceive the enemy; and under cover of darkness withdrew from the field, taking 53 women and children as prisoners. The 7th Cavalry lost 21 officers and men killed and 13 wounded in the Battle of the Washita; the Indians lost perhaps 50 killed and as many wounded. This battle was yet another instance of hitting the Indians in the winter months when the destruction of their villages and stored food killed or weakened more than did the initial military attack.

The Kiowas and Comanches did not lightly relinquish their hunting grounds and forsake their way of life. Some lived restlessly on a reservation in Indian Territory around Fort Sill; others held out. Sherman, now Commanding General of the U.S. Army; Sheridan, commanding the Division of the Missouri; and their field commanders would have to undertake several more major campaigns before these tribes were forced to accept reservation life. In 1871 reservation Kiowas raided into Texas, killing some teamsters of a government wagon train. General Sherman, visiting at Fort Sill, had the responsible leaders (Satanta, Satank, and Big Tree) arrested in a dramatic confrontation on the post between armed Indians and soldiers in which only Sherman's coolness prevented an explosion. Satank was later killed while attempting escape, and Satanta and Big Tree were tried and imprisoned for two years. Again in custody in 1876, Satanta took his own life.

There were other incidents on the Southern Plains before the Indians there were subjugated. An Army campaign in 1874–1875, known as the Red River War, involved about 3,000 troops and was launched in five columns, one under the command of Col. Nelson A. Miles and another under Col. Ranald S. Mackenzie, from bases in Texas, New Mexico, and Indian Territory against the Texas Panhandle refuge of the

CUSTER

George A. Custer (1839–1876) graduated from West Point in 1861. A charismatic leader who won renown for his bold cavalry charges, he was commanding a brigade of cavalry two years later and a division within three. In 1866 the end of the Civil War and the reorganization of the Regular Army reduced Custer to lieutenant colonel and second in command of a regiment. He “found some difficulty in adapting himself to his altered position,” wrote his commanding general, sponsor, and champion, Philip Sheridan, when Custer’s indiscipline and erratic behavior resulted in a court-martial and a year’s suspension without pay. As Custer led his regiment toward the Little Bighorn, no one is certain what his real hopes and ambitions were; but it is clear that his goal, as ever, was personal glory. Unfortunately, he and most of his command were killed to gain that fame.

Plains tribes. On September 24 Colonel Mackenzie and the 4th Cavalry found the winter camps of the Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes, and Arapahos in the deep Palo Duro Canyon on the Staked Plains. Mackenzie’s surprise attack separated the Indians from their horses and belongings, which were destroyed. The campaign continued all winter and into the following spring, with many Indians finally surrendering in desperation and being placed on the reservation.

The Northwest

Not all the Indian Wars were fought with Plains tribes. The Army engaged in wars with several Pacific slope tribes in the 1870s, and the operations were widely scattered over the mountainous northwestern quarter of the trans-Mississippi West.

The Modoc War of 1872–1873 began when the Modocs, who had been placed on a reservation in southern Oregon with the more numerous and traditionally unfriendly Klamaths, returned without permission to their home in the Lost River country on the California border. When the Army attempted in November of 1872 to take them back to the reservation, fighting broke out and the Indians retreated into a natural fortress, the Lava Beds at the southern end of Tule Lake. Over the course of six months there were four engagements in which regular and volunteer troops with superior strength and weapons incurred heavier losses than did their opponents. The extended efforts of a peace commission made little headway and ended in tragedy when two of the members, Brig. Gen. Edward R. S. Canby and the Reverend Eleaser Thomas, both unarmed, were shot while in conference with the Indians. The Modocs finally surrendered; and four of their leaders, including Canby’s murderer, Captain Jack, were hanged.

The practice of uprooting the Indians from their homeland was also the cause of the Nez Perce War in 1877. The Nez Perce had been friendly to the settlers from the days of their contact with Lewis and Clark. Although they had ceded some of their lands to the newcomers, they refused to give up the Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon. Encroachment increased, stiffening the lines of political pressure back to Washington and leading inevitably to decisions favorable to the settlers

and mandating the removal of the Nez Perce to the Lapwai Reservation across the Snake River in Idaho. Some elements of the tribe complied; but Chief Joseph and his people did not, and the Army was ordered to move them. A series of irresponsible actions by both sides led to hostilities.

In a remarkable campaign that demonstrated the unique capabilities of guerrilla forces and the difficulties that formal military units have in dealing with them, the Nez Perce led the Army on a 1,300-mile chase over the Continental Divide punctuated by a number of sharp engagements. The Indians used the terrain to great advantage, fighting when circumstances favored them, side-stepping around opposing forces or breaking contact when the situation dictated it. They lived off the land, while the Army was tied to supply trains that were vulnerable to Indian attack. But their women and children often hindered the Indians' freedom of movement, and eventually Army superiority in strength and weapons began to tell. Indian rifles were no match for howitzers and Gatling guns, and Indian mobility could not outstrip the Army's use of the telegraph to alert additional forces along the Nez Perce line of flight. The battles of White Bird Canyon, Clearwater, Big Hole, Canyon Creek, and Bear Paw Mountain involved hundreds of troops and numerous units under Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, Col. John Gibbon, Maj. Samuel D. Sturgis, and Lt. Gen. Nelson A. Miles. There were heavy casualties on both sides before Chief Joseph surrendered. Joseph

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Thornburgh's Battle (*against the Ute Indians*), Frank Tenney Johnson, 1965

GENERAL CROOK (1828–1890)

Graduating thirty-eighth in a class of forty-three at West Point, George Crook would be the lowest ranking cadet ever to attain the rank of major general in the Regular Army. Laconic and reserved, Crook reveled in field duty. Wounded while fighting Indians in 1857, he carried the arrowhead to his grave. During the Civil War he rose to command a corps. Afterward he returned to the frontier, where he would remain for the rest of his career. A keen student of Indian life and culture, he died while still on active duty after thirty-eight years of military service.

concluded the peace talks with one of the most memorable speeches in western history. “Hear me, my Chiefs,” one army observer remembered Joseph saying, “I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”

In 1878 and 1879 Army forces took the field against various bands of Indians in mountain areas of the Northwest. Operations against the Bannocks, Sheepeaters, and Utes were relatively minor. The Bannock War was caused by settler intrusion on the Camas Prairie in Idaho, where camas roots were a prime source of food for the Indians. The Sheepeater War, also centered in Idaho, broke out when the Indians were charged with several murders they probably did not commit. The Ute War in northwestern Colorado grew out of the misguided methods and impractical idealism of Indian Agent Nathan C. Meeker. Regardless of what caused them, these wars meant hard campaigning and casualties for the Army and the Indians.

The Southwest

The Apaches were among the Army’s toughest opponents in the Indian Wars. The zone of operations embraced the territories of Arizona and New Mexico, western Texas, and Mexico’s northern provinces. Despite the fact that hostile Apaches were relatively few in number and the theater was essentially secondary, they tied down sizable forces over a long period of time.

Post–Civil War Apache troubles extended from the late 1860s, when the Army campaigned against Cochise, through the seventies and eighties, when Victorio and Geronimo came to the fore. On the Army side the important factor was the assignment of Bvt. Maj. Gen. George Crook to the Southwest, where he served two tours between 1871 and 1886. Crook was an able administrator as well as an outstanding soldier and proved to be a relentless opponent of the Indian on the battlefield and a steadfast friend off it. As commander of the Department of Arizona he organized at key locations a number of mobile striking forces under experienced frontier officers and launched them in a concerted campaign supported by mule pack trains. Acting under an 1866 congressional act that authorized the Army to enlist up to a thousand Indian scouts (they came from traditionally friendly tribes like the Crow and Pawnee or from friendly elements of warring tribes), Crook also employed Apache scouts. Converging columns and persistent pursuit



Image Not Available in Internet Version

Tracking Victorio, *Don Stivers, 1988*

brought results, and he left Arizona in relative quiet when he went to the Department of the Platte in 1875.

The quiet in the Southwest did not last long. Largely at the instigation of politicians, merchants, contractors, and other self-serving whites, several bands of mutually uncongenial Apaches were transferred from desirable areas to the unhealthy San Carlos Reservation in the Arizona lowlands. As a result, much of what Crook had accomplished was undone as disgruntled Apaches again turned to raiding and killing. In the summer of 1881, for example, an Apache medicine man stirred the Indians to heights of religious fervor that led to a sharp clash on Cibicu Creek with troops commanded by Col. Eugene A. Carr, one of the Army's most experienced Indian-fighters. The action was highlighted by perhaps the most notable instance of disaffection when the Indian scouts with the command turned on the regulars.

Throughout the Indian Wars there was constant friction between the War and the Interior Departments over the conduct of Indian affairs. A committee of the Continental Congress had first exercised this responsibility. In 1789 it was transferred to the Secretary of War, and in 1824 a Bureau of Indian Affairs was created in the War Department. When the Department of the Interior was established in 1849, the Indian Bureau was transferred to that agency. Thus administration of Indian affairs was handled by one department while enforcement lay with another. General Crook explained to a congressional committee in

1879: “As it is now you have a divided responsibility. It is like having two captains on the same ship.”

Crook returned to Arizona in 1882 to restore the Apaches’ confidence in the white administration, move the Apaches along the paths of civilization, and spar constantly with the Indian Bureau. On the military side, he took the field against dwindling numbers of hostiles, cooperating with Mexican officials and authorized to cross the international boundary in pursuit of the renegades. Crook met with Geronimo in the Sierra Madre Mountains in March of 1886 and negotiated a surrender that brought in all but Geronimo and a few followers who backed out at the last moment. When Washington failed to back the field commander in the conditions on which he had negotiated the surrender, Crook asked to be relieved. Miles replaced him, and Lt. Charles B. Gatewood entered Geronimo’s mountain fastness to arrange a surrender and bring the Apache campaigns to a close.

The Northern Plains

All the elements of the clash of cultures and civilizations were present in the events leading to the final subjugation of the Indians. The mounted tribes of the Great Plains were astride the main corridors of westward expansion, and this was the area of decision. The treaty of 1868 had set aside the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota; and the Army had abandoned the Bozeman Trail, leaving the Powder River region as Indian country. The Sioux, the Northern Cheyenne, and their allies were thus north of the main transcontinental artery along the Platte. Although the arrangement worked for several years, it was doomed by the seemingly irresistible march of settlers. The Sioux rejected white overtures for a right-of-way for the Northern Pacific Railroad; when surveyors went ahead anyway they ran into Indian resistance, which led to the dispatch in 1873 of a large military expedition under Col. David S. Stanley up the Yellowstone Valley. The next year General Sheridan sent Custer and the 7th Cavalry on a reconnaissance through the Black Hills, within the Sioux Reservation. When geologists with the expedition found gold, the word spread rapidly and prospectors filtered into the area despite the Army’s best efforts to keep them out. Another treaty was broken, and band by band angry reservation Indians slipped away to join nontreaty recalcitrants in the unceded Powder River region of Wyoming and Montana.

In December 1875 the Indian Bureau notified the Sioux and Northern Cheyennes that they had to return to the reservation by the end of the following month. Since the Indians were in winter quarters in remote areas and would have had little chance against the elements, they did not obey. As the deadline passed, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs appealed to the Army to force compliance. Sheridan, mindful of his success with converging columns against the Southern Plains tribes, determined upon a similar winter campaign in the north.

Two columns were planned: one under Crook from Fort Fetterman and the other under Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Terry from Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory. In March 1876 Crook’s force, directly commanded by Col. Joseph J. Reynolds, launched its foray on schedule but returned within a month. Reynolds had entered the valley of the



*Geronimo (left center) at Meeting with General Crook
(second from right, seated) in 1886*

Powder and surprised a Cheyenne-Sioux camp but failed to press an initial advantage and withdrew without punishing the Indians. Terry's column never left its fort. The abortive campaign was not renewed until the spring, when Sheridan pressed his subordinates into renewing their attacks, this time with three columns under Crook, Gibbon, and Terry directed against the Powder River area.

General Terry marched west from Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory in May, his principal element the 7th Cavalry under Custer. Colonel Gibbon had earlier moved east from Fort Ellis in western Montana with a mixed force of infantry and cavalry, while General Crook moved north from Fort Fetterman on the North Platte in Wyoming at the end of May with a force heavily weighted in cavalry. Crook made the first contact. The Sioux and Northern Cheyennes learned of his approach along Rosebud Creek, and 1,500 warriors moved to meet him. Crook had fifteen companies of cavalry and five of infantry, 1,000 men, plus another 300 friendly Indians and civilians. The two forces met on roughly equal terms on the seventeenth in heavy fighting. Tactically, neither side carried the field conclusively enough to claim a victory. Strategically, Crook's withdrawal to a supply base to the south gave the Battle of the Rosebud the complexion of a defeat for the Army, especially in view of developments on the Little Bighorn River fifty miles northwest, which his continued advance might have influenced decisively.

While Crook was moving north to his collision on the Rosebud, Terry and Gibbon, marching from east and west, had joined forces on the Yellowstone River at its confluence with the Powder, where a supply base serviced by river steamer was established. Terry sent out the 7th Cavalry to scout for Indian sign, and Maj. Marcus A. Reno with six companies (the cavalry company was not called a troop until 1883) reconnoitered up the Powder, across the Tongue River, and into the valley of the Rosebud. Here on June 17 Reno found a fresh trail leading west out of the valley and across the Wolf Mountains in the direction of the Little Bighorn. He was unaware, and was thus unable to inform

his superiors, that Crook was also in the Rosebud valley and had been engaged and blocked by a large force of Indians not far upstream on this very same day.

Terry held a council of war aboard the steamer *Far West* to outline his plan. Custer's 7th Cavalry would move south up the Rosebud, cross the Wolf Mountains, and enter the Little Bighorn valley from the south. Gibbon, joined by Terry, would ascend the Bighorn River and its tributary, the Little Bighorn, from the north, trapping the Indians between the two forces.

As it happened, Custer moved at least a day early for the cooperative action envisioned in Terry's plan. On June 25, 1876, the 7th Cavalry crossed the Wolf Mountains and moved into the valley of the Little Bighorn. Custer was confident of his capability to handle whatever he ran up against, convinced that the Indians would follow their usual practice of scattering before a show of force and completely unaware that he was descending upon one of the largest concentrations of Indians ever assembled on the Plains. Perhaps as many as 6,000–7,000 Sioux and Northern Cheyennes, with as many as 2,000 warriors under such leaders as Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Gall, Crow King, Lame Deer, Hump, and Two Moon, would confront Custer in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Around noon of this Sunday in June, Custer sent Capt. Frederick W. Benteen with three companies to scout to the left of the command, not an unusual move for a force still attempting to fix the location of an elusive enemy and expecting him to slip away on contact. It is also possible that Custer, knowing the value of the principle of surprise, hoped to catch the foe unawares. About 2:30 p.m., still two miles short of the river when the upper end of an Indian village came into view, Custer advanced three more companies under Major Reno with instructions to cross the river and charge the Indian camp. With five companies Custer moved off to the right, still screened by a fold of ground from observing the extent of his opposition, perhaps with the thought of hitting the Indians from the flank—of letting Reno hold the enemy by the nose while he, Custer, kicked him in the seat of the pants. As Custer progressed, he rushed Sgt. Daniel Kanipe to the rear to hurry the pack train and its one-company escort forward and shortly afterward dispatched Trumpeter John Martin with a last message to Benteen that a “big village” lay ahead and to “be quick—bring packs.”

INDIAN SCOUTS

When engaged in Indian campaigns, the U.S. Army often employed scouts as guides, trackers, and diplomats. American commanders realized that the most effective scouts were Indians recruited from each tribe's traditional enemies. For example, Cheyenne warriors were often employed in campaigns against the Sioux. Indian scouts gained the confidence and respect of Army leaders who quickly learned to follow their advice. George Custer, however, ignored warnings from his Arickara and Crow scouts not to advance against the Indian villages on the Little Big Horn and as a result lost 267 men in battle. The insignia of the Indian Scouts, crossed arrows, was later adopted as the special insignia of the First Special Service Force, a commando unit, in World War II and as the branch insignia of U.S. Army Special Forces.

The main phase of the Battle of the Little Bighorn lasted about two hours. Reno, charging down the river with three companies and some Arickara scouts, ran into hordes of Indians, not retreating, but advancing, perhaps mindful of their creditable performance against Crook the week before and certainly motivated by a desire to protect their women and children and cover a withdrawal of the villages. Far outnumbered, suffering heavy casualties, and in danger of being overrun, Reno withdrew to the bluffs across the river and dug in.

Custer and his five companies, about 230 strong, moved briskly along the bluffs above the river until, some four miles away, beyond supporting distance and out of sight of the rest of the command, they were brought to bay and overwhelmed by an Indian force that heavily outnumbered them. When the last man had fallen and the dead had been plundered, the Indians turned their attention to Reno once again. Due to the absence of any military survivors, the exact conduct of Custer's "last stand" will probably never be known.

While the Indians had been chiefly absorbed on the Custer section of the field, Benteen's battalion and the pack train and its escorting company had moved up and gone into a defensive perimeter with Reno's force. An attempt to move in force in Custer's direction, despite a complete lack of knowledge of his location and situation, failed; the Reno defensive position was reoccupied and remained under attack until dark of the twenty-fifth and on through daylight hours of the twenty-sixth. The siege was finally lifted with the arrival of the Terry-Gibbon column on June 27.

The Custer disaster shocked the nation and was the climax of the Indian Wars. The Army poured troops into the Upper Plains; and the Indians scattered, some, like Sitting Bull's band, to Canada. But gradually, under Army pressure or seeing the futility of further resistance, the Indians surrendered and returned to the reservation. Thus their greatest single victory over the U.S. Army sowed the seeds of the Indians' ultimate defeat as the United States brought to bear its overwhelming power to settle the issue once and for all.

The last feeble gasp of the Indian Wars occurred in 1890 and grew out of the fervor of the Ghost Dance religion. The Sioux were particularly susceptible to the emotional excitement and the call of the old way of life represented in these ceremonies, and their wild involvement frightened the agent on the Sioux Reservation into calling for military protection. The Army responded by a series of military actions known as the Pine Ridge Campaign. One part of that campaign had the 7th Cavalry, now commanded by Col. James W. Forsyth, move to Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Agency, where on December 29 the regiment attempted to disarm Big Foot's band. An Indian's rifle was discharged into the air as two soldiers disarmed him, precipitating a battle in which more than 150 Indians, including women and children, were killed and a third as many wounded, while 25 soldiers were killed and another 37 wounded.

The Battle of Wounded Knee was the last Indian engagement to fall in the category of warfare; later incidents were more in the realm of civil disturbance. The nineteenth century was drawing to a close, and the frontier was rapidly disappearing. Territories were being replaced by states, and new settlers, towns, government, and law were spread-

PINE RIDGE

The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota was the site of the last military conflict between the U.S. Army and American Indians. The reservation became the focal point of the Ghost Dance religion founded by the Paiute shaman Wovoka in 1890. Wovoka taught that a Messiah was coming to liberate the Indians and return their world to a time before whites had arrived. The Bureau of Indian Affairs banned the Ghost Dance and requested that the Army disperse its converts. This resulted in an extensive military campaign from November 17, 1890, to January 21, 1891, with multiple converging columns conducting operations in the states of Nebraska and North and South Dakota. Over 5,500 soldiers were involved in these operations to disarm and control Indians, which resulted in numerous armed engagements and dozens killed or wounded. The most controversial and costly battle of the campaign, for both sides, was the Battle of Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890; but the battle cannot be understood outside of the wider context of the campaign.

ing across the land. The buffalo were gone, and the Indians were confined to reservations to depend on the government for subsistence. An expanded rail system was available to move troops quickly to trouble spots, and the Army could now concentrate its forces at the larger and more permanent posts and relinquish numerous smaller installations that had outgrown their usefulness. By 1895 the Army was deployed more or less equally around the country on the basis of regional rather than operational considerations.

In the quarter century of the Indian Wars the Army met the Indian in over a thousand actions, large and small, all across the American West. It fought these wars with peacetime strength and on a peacetime budget, while at the same time it helped shape Indian policy and was centrally involved in numerous other activities that were part and parcel of westward expansion and of the nation's attainment of its "manifest destiny." Along the way it developed a military culture of self-sufficiency, of experienced small-unit leaders and professionals serving together as part of a brotherhood of arms. Operations against the Indians seasoned the Army and forged a core of experienced leaders who would serve the republic well as it moved onto the world scene at the turn of the century.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the Army have to change its organization and tactics to fight the Indian Wars as opposed to how it fought the Civil War?
2. Compare the Seminole Indian Wars with the Indian Wars on the Great Plains. What were the similarities and differences?
3. Which of the Indian-fighters was most successful in his campaigns, and why? Of the two approaches used—harsh destruction of villages and foodstuffs or winning of "hearts and minds" through assimilation and gentle treatment—which seemed to work best?
4. Why did hundreds of Indians join the Army as Indian Scouts—some earning the Medal of Honor for bravery against other Indians?

5. How would you have settled the “Indian question” during the 1860s and 1870s? What means would have been available to you as an Army officer to change what happened to the Indians, and how would you use those means?

6. What was Fetterman’s big mistake? Custer’s?

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