

Phil Sheridan's War:

The Pacification of the American Frontier and Total War in the Trans-Mississippi West

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Despite the sweltering July heat, Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan felt chilled to the bone. Holding Alfred Terry's note in white-knuckled hands, he read the brigadier general's dispatch in disbelief, "I think I owe it to myself to put you more fully in possession of the late operations."¹ Over the next several pages, a contrite Terry recounted the grim fate of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry. Terry's report validated some of the worst rumors currently swirling around the streets of Philadelphia, a city otherwise abuzz with the nation's centennial. According to the communiqué, an unprecedented coalition of renegade Indians butchered Custer and his men at Little Bighorn.² Sheridan's mood suddenly thawed, his face growing flush as shock gave way to anger. Custer was admittedly a flamboyant pain in the rear end, but still a close friend and fine cavalry officer. The Seventh Cavalry, meanwhile, represented everything right with an otherwise troubled army. Sheridan's Irish blood rolled to a full boil as he finished reading Terry's elusive dispatch. Was it any wonder that it come to this? President Ulysses S. Grant pandered to the humanitarians and Congress seemingly held the army in financial check, while impotent peace commissioners condemned the actions of his men.³ A series of detrimental appropriation acts virtually stripped his division of needed personnel and equipment, as corrupt Bureau of Indian Affairs officers coddled thousands of hostile savages.⁴ Over two hundred good men lay dead, his protégé among them. Maybe now all the bureaucrats and activists would finally listen to reason. Sheridan impatiently sent for his aide and began

¹ James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn—The Last Great Battle of the American West* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 314, citing Lloyd Overfield II, *The Little Big Horn, 1876: The Official Communications, Documents, and Reports, with Rosters of the Officers and Troops of the Campaign* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark, 1971), 36-8.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Clayton K. S. Chun, *Battle Orders: US Army in the Plains Indian Wars 1865-91*, eds. Dr. Duncan Anderson, Marcus Cowper, and Nikolai Bogdanovic (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 4-5.

⁴ Paul Andrew Hutton, "Phil Sheridan's Frontier," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), 23-6, accessed 16 December 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4519113>.

scrawling a note to the General of the Army. The Sioux needed a final whippin' and he damn well felt up to the task.

Phil Sheridan was justifiably angry during the summer of 1876. For the past ten years, the frontier commander dutifully followed in the steps of his mentor, General William T. Sherman, who spent his post-Civil War years fighting recalcitrant Indians west of the Mississippi River. Sheridan scored early victories on the Southern Plains, while commanding the Department of the Missouri, but years of unrelenting fiscal and ideological trials challenged him at every turn.⁵ Things were especially grim through the mid-1870s. Skyrocketing desertion rates, dozens of shabby forts, and bickering officers (incensed over a dwindling number of Congressionally-appropriated promotions) complicated Sheridan's mission.⁶ Meanwhile, the American public clamored for safe passage across the vast Interior and an expedient solution to the persistent "Indian problem."⁷ Sheridan and his army were precariously caught between an insistent public and miserly bureaucracy, both demanding the impossible. In only a few short years, however, he seemingly managed miracles. By the early 1880s, Sheridan smashed almost all Indian resistance, restricted dozens of tribes to reservations, and opened the floodgates of trans-Mississippi West to countless white settlers. What accounted for this seemingly dramatic turn of events? Why was Philip Sheridan successfully able to pacify the Great Plains, despite facing violent American Indian resistance, numerous strategic challenges, crushing political restrictions, and deflating tactical defeats at the outset of the Great Sioux War?

⁵ Lonnie J. White, "The Cheyenne Barrier on the Kansas Frontier, 1868-1869," *Arizona and the West* 4, no. 1 (Spring, 1962), 63-64, accessed 14 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40167726>.

⁶ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 86-92.

⁷ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973, Reprint, Lincoln: Bison Books, 1984), 143-5.

Sheridan ultimately pacified the Great Plains by waging a total war of utter destruction against the refractory Indian tribes of the North American Interior.⁸ Post-Civil War America was a financially fractured and socially divided nation that ambivalently endorsed Sheridan's strategy. Speculative commercial ventures across the Great Plains facilitated a Southern economic recovery and fueled explosive Northern industry, while military actions mended partisan divides by uniting former Civil War adversaries against a mutually perceived threat. The Amerindian's traditional way of life was subsequently and ultimately shattered by an unceasing flood of white emigrants, encroaching railroads, and the consequent annihilation of wild buffalo herds, which previously sustained many generations of nomadic tribes. America's actions during the Post-Civil War period additionally validated a major theory of war developed during the early 1800s. The Prussian military officer and theorist Carl von Clausewitz postulated that wars were subject to political and socioeconomic influences.⁹ Decades later, the United States unwittingly validated his point. The American people, U.S. Army, and Federal Government were complicit and requisite in the act of waging total war against the Plains Indians of the trans-Mississippi West.

The purpose of this inquiry is two-fold. First, it looks to explore the proximate reasons behind Sheridan's strategic and tactical victories on the Great Plains. The Division of Missouri commander was forced into an untenable situation. Nevertheless, Lieutenant General Sheridan managed to completely subjugate his foes after suffering some of the most staggering losses in U.S. Army history. This dramatic shift in momentum is attributed to two influential factors: Phil Sheridan's unique orthodoxy and the specific character of America's nineteenth-century military

⁸ Lance Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 1 (January, 1995), 8, accessed 16 December 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944362>.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 84.

establishment. Sheridan utilized the former to circumvent antiquated army doctrine and a defunct national strategy. The latter acted as a counterweight in his struggles against partisan politics and poor economic policies. The Plains Indians, who were “independent political actors in their own right,” additionally influenced the course and outcome of the war.¹⁰

This study also addresses the causal relationships between the immediate elements that contributed to Sheridan’s triumphs on the battlefield and more distant factors that ultimately led to America’s final subjugation of the Sioux. Many historians debate, for example, the implications of terrorizing recalcitrant Indians with surprise raids that frequently involved the shooting of women and children.¹¹ Academic interests reside not just with the immediate details surrounding these acts, but the greater historic climate that permitted such behavior in the first place. Nineteenth-century Plains Indian culture played into this dynamic, with many tribes ultimately and unwittingly contributing to their own demise.

An arguably more important aspect of this investigation is the practical relevance of the present inquiry. Exploring the past is essentially nothing more than a self-indulgent exercise in antiquarianism unless the act bears some practical significance. Thus, the bulk of this work focuses on the preconditions associated with entire societies forcibly exerting their wills upon other cultures, or the waging of total war in the modern age. In its most abstract form, the theoretical probability of total war is alarming. In an age of constantly evolving technology, increasingly lethal weaponry, and conflicting global agendas, the realistic possibility of total war is truly terrifying. Any study aimed at understanding and dissuading such behavior is worth consideration.

¹⁰ James O. Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), xxii.

¹¹ Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy,” 26; Hutton, “Phil Sheridan’s Frontier,” 23. Although numerous historians debate the Frontier Army’s mistreatment of non-combatants, Janda and Hutton provide some of the most visible instances in which Sheridan’s men engaged in these deplorable practices. The former explores an unofficial doctrinal shift during the Civil War, while the latter focuses on three brutal Great Plains campaigns in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

Historiographic and Academic Influences

The desire to historically link the immediate and distant events that contributed to Sheridan's triumph in the trans-Mississippi West was born out of academic curiosity and historiographic precedent. Initial inspiration came from Clausewitz. His work on the theory of total war and the interrelatedness of conflict, specifically within the context of his "Clausewitzian Trinity" in *On War*, facilitated the academic leap from proximate rationale to ultimate causation.¹² Next, the influential Cold War historian, John Lewis Gaddis, provided the necessary methodology in which to approach causative arguments. Gaddis articulates the finer points of causalities and counterfactuals in his 2002 primer, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*.¹³ University of San Diego Professor of History James O. Gump explores comparative historical standards in, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, a monograph that presents similarities between nineteenth-century Great Britain and the United States in their respective subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux.¹⁴ Last, was the Marxist revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara. His twentieth-century manifesto, titled *Guerrilla Warfare*, provides useful insight into the fundamental features of successful revolts or bungled insurgencies.¹⁵ Che was not a student of the Great Plains Wars per se, but his ideological abstracts go far in explaining how the Sioux and Cheyennes failed to defeat the U.S. Army.

Over the years, a variety of subject matter experts have contributed to a comprehensive body of knowledge concerning frontier life, the Postbellum United States Army, and Plains Indian Culture. Three contributors, among a large field of scholars, distinguished themselves in this

¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

¹³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix-xii.

¹⁴ Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, xxi-xxvii.

¹⁵ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (U.S.A.: BN Publishing, 2007), 7-9.

regard. Retired National Park Service historian Robert “Old Bison” Utley’s *Frontier Regulars* is one of the most definitive monographs concerning the frontier experience and soldiering in the American West. Equally as influential is University of New Mexico Professor of History Paul Andrew Hutton’s *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, a meticulous and insightful study of frontier life. Rounding out this distinguished group is the former National Park Service superintendent and award-winning historian, Paul L. Hedren, whose *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle* and *After Custer* offer a contrarian but credible view of Plains Indians in the trans-Mississippi West.

Concerning descriptions of Plains Indian culture herein, the reader will note an absence of the term *native* in describing any of the various groups that traditionally inhabited the American Interior. This is technically an accurate convention, given that none of belligerents involved in the Plains Indian Wars were truly indigenous to the continent. The Great Plains Wars were primarily waged between two major cultures. On one side were the Sioux, whose ancestors migrated to North America from the opposite side of the world thousands of years ago, during the last great Ice Age. On the other side of the conflict were Euromericans, whose ancestors generally began arriving in the New World starting in the late fifteenth-century. Thousands of European immigrants and free African Americans additionally filled U.S. Army ranks throughout the nineteenth-century. Regardless of their allegiance, millions of people were born on American soil following a mass influx of foreigners into the Western Hemisphere.

When initially introducing prominent Amerindian figures, such as the influential Oglala Lakota leader Red Cloud, specific tribal titles are used rather than vague generalizations.¹⁶ This practice limits the perpetuation of an incorrect ethnocentric observation that American Indians somehow self-identified as one massive “nation” during the nineteenth-century. The various tribes

¹⁶ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, 4th ed. (New York: Owl Books, 2007), 10.

of North America rarely shared collective identities beyond regional borders or local kinship.¹⁷ On the opposite side of the spectrum, the various white or black people who opposed the American Indians are simply referred to as *Americans*, with occasional consideration given to the cultural and social differences between Euromericans or African Americans wherever clarification enhances the overall analysis.

Another potential point of academic contention is the etymology of significant names, places, or events. Controversies frequently result from ethnocentric differences, but occasionally derive from more nuanced disparities as well. A consensus military historian, for example, might refer to an engagement as a “battle” or “fight,” while a revisionist or cultural specialist could label the same altercation a “massacre” or “disaster.” What most United States Western History scholars call the “Fort Kearney Massacre” or the “Fetterman Disaster,” for example, is referred to by Lakota historians as the “Battle of the Hundred in the Hand.”¹⁸ In a similar vein, some scholars note Custer’s Last Stand as taking place during the Battle of Little Bighorn (or Big Horn), while others refer to the fight as the Battle of Greasy Grass.¹⁹ In any event, these matters are reconciled by relying on the most commonly accepted use of terms across the entire spectrum of utilized sources. The conventional spelling of the Battle of Little Bighorn, for instance, is presented with *Bighorn* as a modified noun instead of an attributive phrase (e.g., *Big Horn*).

Of final note is the often-overlooked matter of brevet ranks, or informal titles traditionally bestowed upon regular and volunteer army officers in recognition of heroism or conspicuous gallantry in battle. Brevetted Major General George Armstrong Custer, for example, was a lieutenant colonel in the Regular Army. Brevets afforded their recipients some customary benefits

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-9

¹⁸ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 104-7; Joseph M. Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* (New York: Viking, 2004), 153.

¹⁹ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 291.

and unofficially remained in use for the remainder of the nineteenth-century, but Congress officially abolished the practice shortly after the Civil War. In keeping with general academic practice, regular paygrades are used in all instances except those where brevet ranks are of significant historical note.²⁰

Historical Context

The American Indian Wars, from the broadest of historical perspectives, consisted of a protracted series of conflicts principally fought between Western Europeans and the aboriginal tribes of the Americas, beginning in the late fifteenth-century. From Christopher Columbus's abduction of ten Taino Indians from San Salvador to the bloody 1890 encounter at Wounded Knee, this turbulent era consumed all the New World for approximately four hundred years.²¹ The latter quarter of this overall period constituted the longest episode of continuous domestic conflict in United States history, which concluded with the Plains Indian Wars (1865-91) of the trans-Mississippi West.²² Aggressive continental expansion and brutal Postbellum struggles were some of the defining features of the latter nineteenth-century.

By the 1800s, Indian-white conflicts were nothing new in North America. Early settlers routinely clashed with hostile tribes, English colonists fought members of the First Nations during the French and Indian War, and Cherokee warriors attacked frontier settlements at the outset of the American Revolution.²³ A fresh-faced Lieutenant Sheridan even fought Yakima rebels during one of his initial postings to Fort Reading in the Pacific Northwest.²⁴ By mid-century, most Americans were entrenched in the Civil War. Those who ventured west formed a variety of

²⁰ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 7-8.

²¹ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, xv-2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 2-7.

²⁴ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 7-9.

volunteer militias that continued to combat various Indian tribes over the course of the early 1860s.²⁵ Surrender, Emancipation, and Reconstruction defined an incredibly transitive era, placing the Postbellum Regular Army back into direct conflict with thousands of Amerindians.²⁶ From the Mississippi River to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, this final period of struggles lasted approximately three decades and stands as one of the most challenging eras in national history.²⁷

Major General Philip Sheridan reported to Fort Leavenworth on February 29, 1868.²⁸ He assumed command of the Department of the Missouri upon relieving then acting commander, Colonel Andrew J. Smith.²⁹ A Kansas militia welcomed Sheridan with open arms, but the traditional passing of the colors occurred with relatively little fanfare.³⁰ This lackluster change of command reflected the political and social mood of the late 1860s. Sheridan and the previous commander of the Missouri, General Winfield S. Hancock, failed to exchange standards because they simultaneously swapped assignments under less than favorable circumstances. Hancock was an accomplished Civil War commander but knew little about combating Amerindians.³¹ His razing of an abandoned Cheyenne village precipitated a series of local uprisings that culminated in a “fearful massacre by Indians” at Fort Phil Kearny, an ambush that claimed over one hundred American soldiers and civilians.³² The consequent public relations disaster enraged President

²⁵ Ibid., 49-54.

²⁶ Brian W. Dippie, “The Southern Response to Custer’s Last Stand.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1971), 18-20, accessed 8 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4517554>.

²⁷ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 4-5.

²⁸ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 28.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.

³¹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 114.

³² “Another Fearful Massacre by Indians,” *Farmer’s Cabinet* 65, no. 30 (Amherst, NH), originally published as *The Farmer’s Cabinet*, February 14, 1867, America’s Historical Newspapers.

http://infoweb.newsbank.com.library.norwich.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbld=F5DA49QHMTQ4NTAwOTY2MC41MzcxNTU6MT0xNT0xOTIuMTQ5LjEwOS4yMjQ&p_action=doc&d_viewref=search&s_lastnonissuequeryname=4&p_queryname=4&p_docnum=3&p_docref=v2:108BD1FCD7E9FA90@EANX-108D96155CA30E00@2403012-108D96188CA59838@1-108D9619E84A7400@Another%20Fearful%20Massacre%20by%20Indians.

Andrew Johnson, who was no less embarrassed by Sheridan's actions as a federal supervisor in the South.³³ Only months prior, the hotheaded Irishman forcibly removed several biased bureaucrats from their Louisiana state offices while commanding the army's Fifth Military District.³⁴ President Johnson, recently deprived of his Reconstruction powers by a Radical Republican Congress, unleashed his frustrations on Hancock and Sheridan. Exercising his authority as Commander in Chief, Johnson directed Grant to deprive the officers of their respective commands.³⁵ Hancock eventually found himself back on the Western Frontier, but only after Grant's ascension to the presidency and Sherman's promotion to General of the Army.³⁶

Sheridan faced several massive challenges in the West. On its best day, the Frontier Army was nothing more than a pale shadow of the Union juggernaut that crushed the Confederacy. The army mustered over one million soldiers during the apex of the Civil War but numbers dropped to just 30,000 regulars by 1870.³⁷ Only half of these troops were assigned to the Interior, with the remainder of men occupying Southern cities or coastal forts.³⁸ Meanwhile, the Great Plains were home to roughly one-quarter of a million American Indians, most of whom openly opposed or outright attacked white emigrants.³⁹ One period historian bitterly lamented that in the Post-Civil War Army, "Only the malingers, the bounty-jumpers, the draft-sneakers and the worthless remained. These, with the scum of the cities and frontier settlements, constituted more than half of the rank and file on the plains."⁴⁰ Modern accounts are less damning, but still offer a relatively bleak picture of Postbellum soldiers. "Some were former slaves... Many others were immigrants

³³ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 24-25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-7.

³⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 142-59.

³⁷ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 37, citing J. H. Beadle, *Western Wilds, and the Men Who Redeem Them* (Cincinnati: Jones Brothers, 1881), 550.

from Europe... Additional enlistees included young men lured to the army by adventure and opportunity to see the West. And others, enlisting under an alias, were hiding from the law.”⁴¹

Less than a year later, a newly-elected President Grant appointed Sherman as General of the U.S. Army.⁴² Grant also promoted Sheridan to lieutenant general, who immediately chose to fill Sherman’s vacancy at the Division of the Missouri.⁴³ The move from department to division commander brought with it a flurry of even more daunting challenges. The topographic enormity of his new command was staggering. The Division of the Missouri initially consisted of three geographical branches, including Sheridan’s former department, that covered a mammoth area.⁴⁴ Beginning at the banks of the Mississippi River, the division spanned north to Canada, south to Mexico, and west to the Rocky Mountains. By 1875, Sheridan’s command consisted of five major departments (the Platte, the Dakota, the Missouri, the Texas, and the Gulf), each staffed by a brigadier general and further subdivided into several geographic districts.⁴⁵ In toto, Sheridan’s area of responsibility encompassed over one million square miles.⁴⁶ Making matters worse was the actual end strength of the Frontier Army, which fell far short of the assigned 15,000 enlisted troops. Casualties, desertion, disease, and routine garrison duties (fort construction, kitchen detail, etc.) reduced this number to a paltry 7,000 soldiers, or approximately one able-bodied man for every 140 square miles of patrolled territory.⁴⁷

Staffing and personnel concerns were only a few of the major dilemmas standing in Sheridan’s path. Among a myriad of other pressing issues were the army’s obtuse doctrine and

⁴¹ Louis A. Garavaglia and Charles G. Worman, *Firearms of the American West, 1866-1894* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 3.

⁴² Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 115.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

⁴⁵ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 9.

⁴⁶ Hutton., *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 117.

⁴⁷ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 45.

tightfisted politicians who, in addition to cutting troop strength, indirectly impeded training while stifling technological innovation.⁴⁸ Official nineteenth-century U.S. Army doctrine was centered around a core of dogmatic principles aimed at waging linear war against conventional European forces, as was the case with the War of 1812 and the Franco-Mexican War.⁴⁹ What many of the War Department's top strategists failed to recognize, however, was the asymmetrical and irregular threat that gradually gripped the Great Plains over the course of several decades.⁵⁰ A recent U.S. Army War College study attributes this grievous oversight to two factors. On the one hand, foreign incursions were a very real possibility; Great Britain, France, and Mexico all tested America's strategic resolve during the nineteenth-century.⁵¹ On the other hand, national policy advocated the relocation and containment of Amerindians rather than full-scale domestic warfare.⁵² Strategists and politicians appreciated the general danger of hostile Indian tribes but failed to see Amerindians as a legitimate military threat.⁵³ The army's stunning defeat at Little Bighorn obviously proved otherwise.

Other embarrassing revelations associated with Custer's Last Stand concerned the inadequate arms, equipment, and training methods employed by the U.S. Army. Many reformers of the period insisted that the Seventh Cavalry's fate was sealed by Congressional budget cuts and the failure of the army to adopt a reliable repeating rifle, which the Sioux used to great effect against American soldiers at Little Bighorn.⁵⁴ Fiscal constraints prohibited the Ordnance

⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14-5.

⁵⁰ U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains, A Review of the American Indian Wars: 1865-1891" (Damascus, MD: Penny Hill Press, 2015), 1-2.

⁵¹ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 14.

⁵² U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains," 2-4.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 38-9.

Department from researching and testing cutting-edge weaponry.⁵⁵ Public outcry over the Little Bighorn disaster eventually forced a reluctant Congress to allocate funds to the War Department, which used the money to conduct firearm trials over the remainder of the nineteenth-century.⁵⁶

Studies showed that the army's breech-loading Springfield rifles and carbines outperformed the Sioux and Cheyennes' repeating Winchesters in regards to range, accuracy, and power.⁵⁷ Frontline troops, however, complained about the reliability of the M1873 Springfield compared to that of Winchester repeaters or Spencer carbines.⁵⁸ Both Springfield models gained the ominous reputation of malfunctioning during the heat of battle, with spent cartridges routinely jamming in the breech block or sights failing to hold a zero under combat conditions.⁵⁹ Springfield eventually released an improved version of the single-shot breech-loader in 1877, which corrected several ramrod, extractor, and rear aperture issues.⁶⁰

Manufacturers were faulted for reliability issues, but abysmal and inaccurate fire largely rested on the shoulders of individual soldiers.⁶¹ The ability of the average infantryman to effectively put rounds on his intended target, however, directly correlated to training and funding.⁶² The M1873 Springfield carbine, loaded with a seventy-grain rifle cartridge, was capable of routinely holding an accurate group up to five hundred yards.⁶³ The weapon also produced significant punch, with the same load completely penetrating a ten-inch thick wooden target at distances up to one hundred yards.⁶⁴ Even earlier, less powerful iterations of the Springfield made

⁵⁵ Sidney B. Brinckerhoff and Pierce Chamberlin, "The Army's Search for a Repeating Rifle: 1873-1903," *Military Affairs* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 1968), 20, accessed 14 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1983588>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁷ Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶¹ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 19-20.

⁶² Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 38-9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

a difference on the battlefield. One journalist quoted an officer, lucky enough to survive the Fort Kearney Massacre, as attributing “his successful defense to the long range of the new breech-loading arms.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, all this mattered little to the average frontier soldier, whose annual allocation of training ammunition was limited to a mere ninety bullets, equating to about a dozen practice rounds per year.⁶⁶ Politicians were eventually forced to turn out their pockets after the debacle at Little Bighorn. By the winter of 1877, soldiers began receiving almost three hundred rounds annually.⁶⁷

Sheridan’s men were preoccupied with much more than marksmanship scores while serving on the frontier. Unlike pinewood targets, renegade Indians frequently shot back and were some of finest guerrilla warfighters the army ever faced. The most prolific group of warriors were the Lakota Sioux, who occupied a large swath of the Central and Northern Great Plains.⁶⁸ This huge community consisted of several smaller groups that included the Santee, Tetons, Oglalas, Hunkpapas, and Brulés.⁶⁹ Powerful Amerindian leaders, such as Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse, hailed from these tribes.⁷⁰ Sharing the region with the Sioux were their close relatives, the Cheyennes. The Northern Cheyennes occupied portions of the Montana and Wyoming Territories, which included the Powder and Bighorn Rivers, while the Southern Cheyenne lived mostly in Colorado Territory and Kansas, primarily south of the Platte River.

⁶⁵ “Fight with the Indians near Fort Phil. Kearney,” *Famer’s Cabinet* 66, no. 5 (Amherst, NH), originally published as *The Famer’s Cabinet*, August 22, 1867, America’s Historical Newspapers, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.library.norwich.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=F5DA49QHMTQ4NTAwOTY2MC41MzcxNTU6MToxNToxOTIuMTQ5LjEwOS4yMjQ&p_action=doc&d_viewref=search&s_lastnonissuequeryname=4&p_queryname=4&p_docnum=4&p_doref=v2:108BD1FCD7E9FA90@EANX-108D9680EEE11D28@2403201-108D968163161DE0@1-108D9683176C5298@Fight%20with%20the%20Indians%20near%20Fort%20Phil.%20Kearney.

⁶⁶ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 9-10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Morning Star, or Dull Knife as he was known by the Sioux, was a prominent Northern Cheyenne and persistent adversary.⁷¹ His southern kin included leaders, such as Black Kettle, who led the ferocious Dog Soldiers through many years of conflict.⁷²

The Arapahos lived slightly further south, occasionally cohabitated with Northern Cheyennes, and opposed the U.S. Army early in Sheridan's career as a frontier regular.⁷³ Below the Arapahos lived the Kiowas and Comanches, who ruled the Southern Plains.⁷⁴ Satanta and Lone Wolf were two notable figures from these communities, equally renowned for their fighting spirit and statesmanship.⁷⁵ Many other refractory tribes occupied adjacent regions at the southern and western peripheries of Sheridan's division. Kickapoos, Navajos, Apaches, Modocs, and Utes offered significant resistance on the southern edge of the Texas and the American Southwest.⁷⁶

America's dire missteps in Indian-white relations during the nineteenth-century were manifold. From a strategic standpoint, the Federal Government's most grievous mistake was underestimating the martial resolve and tactical capabilities of the Sioux-Cheyenne confederation. Divided and indifferent policy-makers complicated matters by placing the Departments of War and Interior at odds with one another.⁷⁷ The former was primarily responsible for the forcible removal and relocation of Indians, while the latter unsuccessfully attempted to administer federal regulations.⁷⁸ A corrupt Bureau of Indian Affairs quickly proved itself incapable of adequately addressing the needs of thousands of displaced Amerindians.⁷⁹ Promised subsidies never made it to their intended recipients, scrupulous sutlers took advantage of confused refugees, and renegade

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 10.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 4-6.

⁷⁷ U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains," 6.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

bands frequently participated in unsanctioned hunts or raids off the reservation.⁸⁰ All of this tension and chaos erupted during the summer of 1876, when Washington bureaucrats were finally forced to take notice.

None of these issues—inadequate doctrine, financial contractions, drastic personnel reductions, unreliable firearms, insufficient training, and a woeful underestimation of American Indian determination—were isolated incidents. Systemic failures, brought on by parsimonious politicians and partisan bureaucrats, nearly destroyed the army. Intense socioeconomic rifts divided nineteenth-century Americans, while simultaneously influencing affairs of the state. Hutton observes that, “Sheridan and his frontier army did not exist in a void, untouched by national and international affairs... To national-policy makers, frontier expansion was an inevitable process that could be subordinated to more pressing political or economic needs in the East.”⁸¹ Yet, Sheridan and his men eventually prevailed. What accounted for this sudden shift in national policy and consequent subjugation of the Sioux? Why were Philip Sheridan and the U.S. Army, after enduring so many years of financial and logistic strife, suddenly able to pacify the Great Plains?

Proximate Factors

As Hutton points out in the above passage, the U.S. Army was part of a larger socioeconomic system, a detail that left both Sheridan and his men at the mercy of the state. Sherman and Sheridan overcame these obstacles by relying on their mutual combat experience and strategic intuition. The most immediate and proximate causes leading to eventual triumph stemmed from fundamental lessons learned in the South that consequently steered the army down

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-10.

⁸¹ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, xiv.

a path of total war in the untamed West.⁸² Converging columns, surprise attacks, winter warfare, and harassing operations were integral features of this Postbellum conflict.⁸³ Sheridan additionally afforded his field commanders unprecedented levels of autonomy, which allowed them to make independent tactical decisions that frequently led to victory.⁸⁴ Sheridan routinely defended the actions of his fanatical commanders by frequently engaging in heated dialogues with many of the army's partisan and ideological critics.⁸⁵ Sheridan's political activism and public tirades served as a double-edged sword, however, both sustaining limited popular support in the West while drawing the rancor of critics in the East.⁸⁶ Paul Hedren aptly describes this imperfect but effective policy as, "an orthodoxy...quite well suited to the mission at hand."⁸⁷

Total war was not part of West Point's official military curriculum, but instead a learned practice.⁸⁸ Lance Janda points out that the nineteenth-century incarnation of total war, as an applied element of modern warfare rather than a theoretical academic abstract, owes its roots to the "trinity" of Union generals that led the North to victory in the South: Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan.⁸⁹ Sherman revealed that, "Atlanta was known as the 'Gate-City of the South,' was full of foundries, arsenals, and machine-shops, and I knew that its capture would be the death-knell of the Southern Confederacy."⁹⁰ His summation was accurate; the targeting of Southern infrastructure unquestionably broke Lee's forces. The unprecedented decimation of regional

⁸² Lance Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 1 (January, 1995), 8, accessed 16 December 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944362>.

⁸³ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 142-7.

⁸⁴ U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains," 12.

⁸⁵ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 180-2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Paul L. Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle: How the United States Army Waged War on the Northern Plains, 1876-1877* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 9.

⁸⁸ Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy," 10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁰ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*. Vol. II. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1891. Reprint, North Scituate: Digital Scanning, Inc., 1999), 99, <http://site.ebrary.com/library.norwich.edu/lib/norwich/reader.action?docID=2001571>.

civilian targets translated rather seamlessly to engagements on the Western Frontier, where soldiers found the pillaging of “savage” Indian camps somewhat more palatable than the annihilation of Southern homes and businesses.⁹¹

The Southern Plains War (1868-69) was one of Sheridan’s initial offensives as a department commander and exemplifies his brutal strategy in the West. Indian-white relations were at an all-time low during the summer of 1868, with Amerindian raiders storming the countryside, lashing out against white emigrants, stealing livestock, burning farms, and killing approximately eighty settlers across parts of the Interior.⁹² Renegade warriors, furious over past white depredations and unwilling to abandon their ancestral homelands, refused to recognize the legitimacy of their placid tribal leaders, the authority of the U.S. Government, or the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867.⁹³ Springing up from the Southern Plains, Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, rebel Arapahoes, Southern Brulés, recalcitrant Kiowas, and fearsome Comanches terrorized settlements as far north as the Union Pacific Railroad, situated along Nebraska’s Platte River.⁹⁴ The marauders quickly gained the ire of American policy-makers, who held vested political and financial interests in lucrative railroad contracts and budding cattle companies.⁹⁵ Sheridan, at the behest of Grant and Sherman, quickly devised a shocking winter campaign that set the stage for one of the most acrimonious battles of the era.

The Battle of Washita River serves as a textbook example of Sheridan’s familiarity with the tenets of total war and his experiences as a Union commander.⁹⁶ Consisting of three separate columns, staffed with regular troops, friendly Amerindian scouts, and a Kansas militia, Sheridan

⁹¹ Thomas C. Leonard, “Red, White and the Army Blue: Empathy and Anger in the American West,” *American Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (May, 1974), 178-9, accessed 30 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712234>.

⁹² Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 143.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 143-5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ White, “The Cheyenne Barrier on the Kansas Frontier, 1868-1869,” 51-4.

⁹⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 144-5.

steadily campaigned south, where his forces eventually converged below the Arkansas River and obliterated renegade resistance.⁹⁷ The frigid weather nullified any advantage the Cheyennes usually held in overall maneuverability and endurance, which rested upon the backs of their itinerant pony herds.⁹⁸ A lack of forage and game animals during the winter months typically forced these otherwise nomadic tribes to make camp for the season until the spring thaw brought with it the prospect of a new hunt.⁹⁹ In the meantime, Sherman offered refuge to any surrendering Indians who relocated to Fort Cobb, near the recently-constructed Kiowa-Comanche Reservation, located in the heart of Indian Territory.¹⁰⁰ Sherman and Sheridan's stated aim was to "hold out the olive branch with one hand and the sword with the other."¹⁰¹

In November of 1868, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Sully's column, spearheaded by Custer's Seventh Cavalry, discovered an Indian trail in the Washita River Valley.¹⁰² The overzealous Custer, given a wide command berth and always ready for a fight, orchestrated a dawn raid on an unsuspecting Cheyenne village.¹⁰³ With guns blazing, the Seventh Cavalry charged into the sleepy valley. Custer's men seized the camp in short order but spent the remainder of the day dealing with small bands of determined warriors who desperately tried to draw troops away from fleeing Indian families.¹⁰⁴ Two officers and nineteen men were killed in action but the Cheyennes suffered even greater losses. Custer reported over one hundred warriors slain and nearly nine hundred ponies slaughtered, all while doing irreparable damage to Cheyenne shelters and winter supply

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 16.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 144-5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 145, citing Sherman to Sheridan, Oct. 15, 1868, Senate Ex. Docs., 40th Cong., 3rd sess., No. 18, Pt. 1, pp. 3-5.

¹⁰² Ibid., 150.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 150-1.

stores.¹⁰⁵ The “Washita Massacre,” as it soon became known in certain circles, completely demoralized many of the renegades.¹⁰⁶ A majority of the Kiowa and Comanche warriors abandoned their Cheyenne comrades for the safety of reservation life, never again staging any major resistance on the Southern Plains.¹⁰⁷

For all its strategic success, Washita was another public relations disaster for the U.S. Army. Among the Amerindian dead were several women and children who, according to many activists, were brutally murdered in cold blood.¹⁰⁸ Callous indifference, made public in newspapers and memoirs, fueled the wrath of eastern humanitarians. “We had returned on the 30th of November from the campaign of Washita,” wrote an unapologetic Custer, “well satisfied with the results of our labors and exposures...to mutual congratulations upon the success which had already rewarded our efforts.”¹⁰⁹ Over fifty lodges were destroyed, which forced many captive families to make an appalling winter march to distant reservations.¹¹⁰ The greatest irony rested perhaps with the demise of the compliant Cheyenne chief, Black Kettle, who was turned away from the gates of Fort Cobb earlier the same week.¹¹¹ Gunned down along with his wife during the firefight, Black Kettle attempted to surrender just days before the battle. The unyielding Sheridan, however, felt completely vindicated. In his mind, Custer avenged past depredations—including the abduction of a white mother and her baby, whose mutilated bodies were recovered

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 152-3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 157-9.

¹⁰⁸ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 65.

¹⁰⁹ George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains, or, Personal Experiences with Indians* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1874), 187,

http://go.galegroup.com/library_norwich.edu/gdsc/i.do?&id=GALE%7CSC5100985287&v=2.1&u=vol_n82n&it=r&p=GDSC&sw=w&viewtype=Transcript.

¹¹⁰ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 65-6.

¹¹¹ Utey, *Frontier Regulars*, 151

within the vicinity of Washita—on that cold November morning.¹¹² Sheridan’s personal memoirs, published twenty years after Washita, reflect his unapologetic mindset:

The blow struck was a most effective one, and, fortunately, fell on one of the most villainous of hostile bands that, without any provocation whatever, had perpetrated the massacres on the Saline and Solomon [Rivers], committing atrocities too repulsive for recital, and whose hands were still red from their bloody work on the recent raid. Black Kettle, the chief, was an old man, and did not himself go with the raiders... on this account his fate was regretted by some. But it was old age only that kept him back... he had freely encouraged them by “making medicine” are by other devilish incantations that are gone through with at war and scalp dances.¹¹³

Other proximate factors, more integral to the character of the Post-Civil War army rather than Sheridan’s mutable ethos, additionally contributed to a string of tactical victories on the Great Plains. Sound leadership, unit cohesion, and tactical innovations invigorated an institution otherwise at the political and financial mercy of bickering bureaucrats. Sheridan’s ranks were also bolstered by the unprecedented inclusion of recently-freed African American soldiers within the Regular Army, the on-again-off-again employment of civilian trackers, and the enrollment of friendly Indian scouts. Collectively, these elements facilitated the Frontier Army’s mission and immediately contributed to Sheridan’s eventual triumph in the Great Plains Wars.

The army relied extensively upon an adaptable and experienced corps of capable leaders. Paul Hedren is one of the most vocal proponents of this view, taking issue with the popularly-held belief that U.S. Army officers were inexperienced and not up to the task of leading men into battle at the outset of the Great Sioux War (1876-77).¹¹⁴ He offers some compelling figures in supporting his claim. Sixty-one percent of all the officers involved in the Great Sioux War, for example, were Civil War combat veterans.¹¹⁵ One-hundred percent of Sheridan’s general and field-grade officers

¹¹² Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 78-81.

¹¹³ Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*. Vol. II. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1888. Reprint, North Scituate: Digital Scanning, Inc., 1999), 318, <http://site.ebrary.com/library.norwich.edu/lib/norwich/reader.action?docID=2001531>.

¹¹⁴ Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

saw action in the Union Army.¹¹⁶ Of this group, fifty-nine men previously faced hostile Indians on the Northern Plains and an additional nine officers fought Sioux renegades on the Bozeman Trail.¹¹⁷ Out of the thirty-two field-grade officer commanding line units, twenty-one were West Point graduates.¹¹⁸ Over 90% of these men earned brevets for distinguished service or gallantry during the Civil War.¹¹⁹ Quantitative analyses of Sheridan's company-grade officers paint a similar statistical picture.¹²⁰ By the time of the Great Sioux War, the Frontier Army was undoubtedly led by seasoned officers.¹²¹

Experienced commanders maximized combat effectiveness by identifying training shortfalls, correcting staffing issues, or otherwise compensating for material shortages.¹²² Prior to departing for Washita, for example, Sheridan supported Custer's decision to supplement the Seventh Cavalry's marksmanship training while garrisoned at their basecamp along the North Canadian River.¹²³ Custer took the top sharpshooters in his regiment and assigned them to an elite detachment that was afforded many special incentives, such as not being assigned to guard duty.¹²⁴ As previously noted, most frontier soldiers were mediocre shots at best and lacked the necessary training to take full advantage of their Springfield rifles and Spencer carbines.¹²⁵ Custer's sharpshooters proved otherwise at the Battle of Washita. Despite the ominous historical cloud that hangs over the engagement, records indicate that the Seventh Cavalry defeated Black Kettle's Cheyennes with a barrage of withering and accurate fire.¹²⁶

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 27.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 27-9.

¹²¹ Ibid., 26-9.

¹²² Chun, *Battle Orders*, 21.

¹²³ Garavaglia and Worman, *Firearms of the American West*, 23.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 23.

The frontier army consisted of more than just capable officers. Seasoned enlisted men also led the way to victory.¹²⁷ Chief among this group were veteran noncommissioned officers (NCOs), gruff leaders who served as valuable intermediaries between officers and their men.¹²⁸ Unlike commissioned officers, NCOs hailed from different levels of society and advanced internally through the enlisted ranks.¹²⁹ Approximately half of the rank and file participating in the Great Sioux War were European immigrants. “Italians stood shoulder to shoulder with Scandinavians, Irishmen bunked with Germans, Englishmen marched with Russians.”¹³⁰ Other men, typically first or second-generation Euromericans, joined the army for an assortment of reasons.¹³¹ Some recruits, particularly those from cities, enlisted seeking adventure and liberation from urban poverty back East.¹³² Other more scrupulous characters signed papers to evade the law or simply hitch a free ride out West, whereupon arriving at their assigned post they would immediately desert their garrisons in search of gold or other fortunes.¹³³ Such capers, coupled alongside the fact that many immigrant soldiers were uneducated tramps, gave enlisted men a rather unremarkable reputation.¹³⁴ The American public generally considered Postbellum soldiering the work of undesirables, one best left to the lesser elements of society.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, accomplished sergeants and corporals were the mainstay of many combat units.¹³⁶ Major George A. Forsyth, a distinguished combat veteran and Sheridan’s aide-de-camp, romantically reflected that:

It was a fine sight to see one of these old men on muster or monthly inspection. Erect and soldiery, with his red face glistening, his white hair cut close, his arms and accoutrements shining, not a wrinkle in his neat-

¹²⁷ Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 28-9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 29.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 22.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

fitting uniform, nor a speck of dust about him, his corps badge, and it may be a medal, on his breast, he stood in the ranks among the other soldiers like an oak tree in a grove of cottonwood saplings.¹³⁷

Many career noncommissioned officers, who previously saw action during the Civil War, imparted valuable experience and wisdom upon greenhorn privates. Recruit depots of the era, due to fiscal and personnel restraints, were nothing more than waypoints where enlistees received gear, minimal instruction in service protocols, and were sent on their way.¹³⁸ “Not only were the NCOs relied upon to manage the men,” writes one historian, “they were also expected to be skillful drillmasters, be able to execute minor tactics, and to be familiar with army regulations and procedures.”¹³⁹ A frontier officer framed the situation in similar terms while testifying before Congress, “Non-commissioned officers are the bone and sinew of a regiment and are of so much importance to an army that the greatest care should be taken in their selection.”¹⁴⁰ These NCOs brusquely galvanized their men’s morale, improved esprit de corps, and enhanced overall unit cohesion.¹⁴¹

Douglas C. McChristian, in examining the value of NCOs, additionally touches upon two other proximate causes behind the army’s victory in the West that bear mentioning. The first is the emergence of new tactics that afforded the army greater mobility and protection on the frontier.¹⁴² Earlier conflicts, such as the Civil War, confirmed that tactics failed to keep pace with the weapons of the era. Linear warfare was incompatible with many recent advances in small arms and artillery. Mass-produced rifles, breech-loading field guns, and Minié balls decimated line

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 20.

¹³⁹ Douglas C. McChristian, “‘Dress on the Colors, Boys!’ Black Noncommissioned Officers in the Regular Army, 1866-98,” in *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, eds. Bruce A. Galsrud and Michael N. Searles (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 87, PDF e-book.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 85-6.

¹⁴² Chun, *Battle Orders*, 42-3.

units with ease.¹⁴³ The days of standing shoulder to shoulder in an open meadow prior to rushing the enemy with a heroic bayonet charge were at an end. Emory Upton, an accomplished commander, strategist, and West Point commandant, offered a solution to this problem.¹⁴⁴ Instead of massing troops and forcing one's men to endure a deadly fusillade of accurate rifle fire, Upton proposed that soldiers utilize discrete and maneuverable formations.¹⁴⁵ Four-man squads were still capable of delivering accurate and long-range shots with their modern weapons, but less susceptible to enemy fire.¹⁴⁶ Other innovations concerned improvements and recommendations with annual marksmanship training, close order drill, and convoy procedures.¹⁴⁷ Upton strived to save lives by turning the U.S. Army into an efficient fighting force. In prefacing his widely published and promulgated *Infantry Tactics*, the reformer advised that, "In the study of any military subject, we should bear in mind that every great discovery in the art of war has a life-saving and peace-promoting influence. The effects of the invention of gunpowder are a familiar proof of this remark, and the same principle applies to discoveries of modern times."¹⁴⁸ Upton's approach was so successful that it remains a fundamental element of the modern military drill and maneuvers today.

One final feature of the Postbellum military establishment, which remains an integral part of the modern American Army, was the inclusion of recently-freed slaves within its regular ranks. In his essay title, "'Dress on the Colors, Boys!' Black Noncommissioned Officers in the Regular Army, 1866-98," McChristian examines some of the remarkable contributions made by African

¹⁴³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴⁶ Chun, *Battle Orders*, 58.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 58-9.

¹⁴⁸ Emory Upton, *Upton's Infantry Tactics...* ed. Lieut. Hugh T. Reed, U. S. Army, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: A. W. Reed & Co., 1882. Reprint, n.p.: Google Books, 2007), 6, PDF e-book.

American NCOs during the latter half of the nineteenth-century.¹⁴⁹ The author draws inspiration for the title of his article from words shouted by Sergeant George Berry as the Tenth U.S. Cavalry stormed San Juan Hill, during the height of the Spanish-American War.¹⁵⁰ Berry served with distinction for over three decades, beginning shortly after Congress approved the enlistment of African Americans in the army.¹⁵¹ The physical courage and moral example set by Berry were typical of NCOs from the mid-1860s onward.¹⁵² William A. Dobak seconds McChristian's account by sharing some exploits of the newly-commissioned black units stationed around Fort Riley, Kansas at the apex of the Great Plains Wars.¹⁵³ In addition to rescuing over fifty civilian trackers from Beecher Island during the Comanche War, all four African American regiments served with distinction across the Interior.¹⁵⁴ From Sheridan's early campaigns on the Southern Plains, to railroad duties in the Southwest, and garrison details further north, these "Buffalo Soldiers" profoundly impacted the frontier.¹⁵⁵ Eighteen Medals of Honor were awarded to black soldiers over the course of the Plains Indian Wars.¹⁵⁶

With staffing levels and funding at a monumental low, officials additionally sought relief through the recruiting and regularization of friendly Indian scouts. The revolving enlistment of one thousand Indian scouts, who received pay and entitlements comparable the average cavalryman, was significantly cheaper than training a similar number of full-time soldiers.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹ McChristian, "'Dress on the Colors, Boys!' Black Noncommissioned Officers in the Regular Army, 1866-98," 86.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 86-7.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ William A. Dobak, "Fort Riley's Black Soldiers and the Army's Changing Role in the West, 1867-85," in *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, eds. Bruce A. Galsrud and Michael N. Searles (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 35-6, PDF e-book.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-9.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37-40.

¹⁵⁶ McChristian, "'Dress on the Colors, Boys!' Black Noncommissioned Officers in the Regular Army, 1866-98," 93-4.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas W. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860-90* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 43-4.

Realistically, harsh fiscal constraints forced the army to make several tough staffing decisions, which kept the actual assigned figure of Indian scouts capped around three hundred volunteers.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, creative and adaptable commanders routinely circumvented the system by enrolling scouts under alternate billet descriptions, such as cooks or waggoneers.¹⁵⁹

Regardless of their overall number, friendly Indian scouts proved potent in battle. Black Seminole Indian trackers in the Big Bend region of Texas, for example, brought many Kickapoo and Apache criminals to justice during the closing acts of the Plains Indian Wars.¹⁶⁰ In his monograph, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, Thomas W. Dunlay shares some of the praise for Amerindian pathfinders.¹⁶¹ Henry “Old Brains” Halleck remarked that, “As guides and scouts, they are almost indispensable.”¹⁶² Neighboring Department of Columbia commander Major General Frederick Steele wrote, “In the late expedition they have done most of the fighting and killing. They have also proved themselves very efficient when acting alone; they are very useful as guides and spies and in destroying the spies of the enemy.”¹⁶³

Friendly Amerindians were not the only spies employed by Sheridan and the Frontier Army. Field commanders also relied on freelance Euromerican scouts and guides, many of whom lived their entire lives west of the Mississippi River on the wild frontier.¹⁶⁴ Sheridan held many of these agents in high regard, appreciating the value of a reliable intelligence network. Learning this lesson during the Civil War, Sheridan employed covert operatives throughout the remainder

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas A. Britten, “The Black Seminole Indian Scouts in the Big Bend,” in *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, eds. Bruce A. Galsrud and Michael N. Searles (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 143, PDF e-book.

¹⁶¹ Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 46, citing U.S. Congress, House, Secretary of War, *Annual Report*, 1867, 1:73-74.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 46-7, citing U.S. Congress, House, Secretary of War, *Annual Report*, 1867, 1:79.

¹⁶⁴ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 35-7.

of his career.¹⁶⁵ Somewhat mistrustful of Indians, the cynical Sheridan preferred to rely on white scouts who cohabitated with tribes, rather than the “savages” themselves.¹⁶⁶ “[I] also endeavored to control them through certain men who, I found, because of former associations, had their confidence,” Sheridan remarked. “These men... lived on the Plains for many years with different tribes of Indians, had trapped and hunted with them, and knew all the principal chiefs and headmen.”¹⁶⁷ Ostensibly employed to facilitate a peaceful resolution in Kansas, Sheridan later used scouts and spies to facilitate the planning of his winter campaign.¹⁶⁸

Sheridan developed several close friendships with his volunteer scouts. Irrespective their individual motivations, tendencies, or reputations, these men played an important role in the Frontier Army. He relied upon men such as Ben Clark and William “Medicine Bill” Comstock to provide accurate intelligence.¹⁶⁹ Other more colorful characters, such as the hard-drinking “California Joe” Milner, earned fickle reputations—a drunken Joe once mistook a company of Custer’s cavalry for renegade Indians and charged headlong into a formation of U.S. soldiers.¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody achieved celebrity status as an army scout.¹⁷¹

Sheridan and his scouts faced numerous tribes, who fought in defense of their homelands and traditional way of life. The Plains Indians offered tenacious resistance, but many internal missteps ironically contributed to their own defeat. One of the more compelling studies concerning this issue is Gump’s monograph, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux*. Primarily a work of comparative history, Gump looks at the similarities

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 38-9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*, 287.

¹⁶⁸ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 38-40.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 36-7.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹⁷¹ Paul L. Hedren, “The Contradictory Legacies of Buffalo Bill Cody's First Scalp for Custer,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 55, no. 1 (Spring, 2005), 16-35, accessed 30 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4520671>.

between tenuous American and African frontiers during an age of colonial imperialism.¹⁷² A vital aspect of his thesis is that subjugated cultures are often complicit in their own demise.¹⁷³ In the case of the Indian-white conflicts, one only need look to the widespread individualism prevalent in Plains Indian societies to better appreciate this concept.

Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, imagine a frontier as “a zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies,” offer a comparable analysis.¹⁷⁴ Gump’s theory and the Lamar-Thompson model suggest that America’s Western Frontier remained tenable, even in the face of internal Indian tensions between Plains tribes. The crux of both arguments rests upon the notion that social intercourse and cultural friction are integral to the rise and fall of frontiers.¹⁷⁵

The most divisive aspect of nineteenth-century aboriginal American culture was internecine intra-Indian conflict and inter-tribal struggles, rivalries established long before Sheridan and the Frontier Army arrived on the Great Plains. Like other energetic and expanding civilizations, many North American tribes competed for finite resources and territorial sovereignty. One of the earliest nineteenth-century accounts of inter-tribal tensions involves the factional disputes associated with the signing of the first Fort Laramie Treaty, in 1851.¹⁷⁶ The Council at Horse Creek, as it is known in Lakota oral history, involved the gathering of many Plains Indians before a group of white delegates who spoke on behalf of the U.S. Government. Among those present were members of the greater *Titunwan* (Lakota) nation, including the Oglalas and Sicangus.¹⁷⁷ Old Lakota adversaries also sat in on this conference, temporarily putting aside their

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, eds. *The Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 7.

¹⁷⁵ Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, xxiii; Lamar and Thompson, *The Frontier in History*, 7.

¹⁷⁶ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 32-3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv, and 32-3.

differences, but ultimately unwilling to let go of ancient rivalries.¹⁷⁸ The Blackfeet and Crows were two of the major antagonists present, with the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras adding strain to an already uneasy gathering of competitors.¹⁷⁹ The Fort Laramie Treaty Council proved ineffective on several counts. White delegates made uneducated and ridiculous demands of Amerindians, such as a permanent ceasing of hostilities between the gathered tribes.¹⁸⁰ Surprised leaders responded with retorts such as, “tell the wind to stop blowing,” or “the river to stop flowing.”¹⁸¹ By the mid-nineteenth-century, hereditary rivalries were obviously an ingrained way of life for many Plains Indians.

Another detrimental form of intra-Indian conflict was the constant power struggle internally characteristic to many tribes.¹⁸² Euromerians incorrectly assumed that tribal leaders spoke on behalf of all their people. The raw form of direct democracy practiced by many tribes prevented the formation of centralized, Euromerian-style bureaucratic policies.¹⁸³ Subsequently, thousands of Amerindians were either left completely unaware of many treaties or outright refused to abide by such agreements.¹⁸⁴ Young men sought glory in ritualistic battles or the accumulation of valuable commodities, not peace with deceitful whites.¹⁸⁵ Similar issues plagued subsequent accords through the late 1860s.¹⁸⁶

Cognizant army officers were aware of these divides and frequently used inter-Indian differences to their tactical and strategic advantage. One of Sheridan’s most trusted generals, Nelson A. Miles, was a master of leveraging internal Amerindian conflicts against his frontier

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 32-3.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 32-4.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁸² Chun, *Battle Orders*, 52-3.

¹⁸³ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 140.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 34-36.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 145.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 49-52.

adversaries.¹⁸⁷ He routinely employed friendly Indian scouts, such as Shoshones and Crows, who despised the Sioux.¹⁸⁸ Miles formed several special infiltration units, during the Powder and Yellowstone River campaigns of the late 1870s, that ruthlessly hunted down renegade Sioux and Cheyennes across the Plains.¹⁸⁹ The Crows were more than willing to unleash vengeance on their hereditary enemies.¹⁹⁰

Causalities, Counterfactuals, and Consequences

Establishing proximate causation behind Sheridan's triumph is a straightforward exercise in identifying necessary or dependent variables in historical course of events (e.g., *Factor A* precipitates or hastens *Event B*). Pinpointing the ultimate and more distant causes behind the pacification of the Great Plains, however, requires a slightly more comprehensive approach. Sheridan and the Frontier Army waged total war against thousands of Amerindians. Why did a battle-weary nation tolerate his brutal tactics and so many other deplorable aspects of the Plains Indian Wars? The probable explanation is that Sheridan's victory in the trans-Mississippi West was consequent to a specific assortment of social, political, and economic phenomena unique to the Post-Bellum United States and the American Frontier. From a counterfactual standpoint, the absence or abatement of any of these factors could theoretically affected the course and outcome of the Great Plains Wars (Fig. 1).¹⁹¹

The idea that history is related to or dependent upon preceding forces and events is not new. E. H. Carr and Marc Bloch, two of the founding fathers of modern academic history, explored

¹⁸⁷ Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, 54-6.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-6.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-6.

¹⁹⁰ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 133.

¹⁹¹ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2005), 87. Diamond does not provide any specific commentary concerning the Plains Indian Wars, but does provide some excellent insight into the more poignant aspects of the causality arguments presented here. Figure 1 is based on Diamond's material.

this topic during the last century.¹⁹² Both historians were concerned with establishing causality. The former sought to differentiate between the historical influence of “rational” and “accidental” variables, while the latter dealt more in terms of temporal proximity.¹⁹³ To better demonstrate their respective theories, consider the following two paraphrased examples offered by Gaddis in

The Landscape of History:

Carr’s Rationality Argument:

A man crosses the street to buy a pack of cigarettes late at night. A drunk driver accidentally strikes the man, who later dies at the hospital. A rational conclusion is that stricter drinking and driving laws might reduce traffic deaths. On the other hand, it is irrational to assume that restricting the sale of cigarettes would have the same effect.¹⁹⁴

Bloch’s Temporal Influence Argument:

A man is walking up a steep mountain road when he accidentally slips off the shoulder and falls to his death. The chain of events that potentially contributed to the man’s death, from most immediate (proximate) to the most distant (ultimate), include: the man’s footing, the absence of a guardrail, tectonic forces that formed the mountain over millions of years, gravity, etc., etc.¹⁹⁵

Neither of the above theories are perfect and scholars frequently debate the merits of both arguments.¹⁹⁶ Gaddis expresses such apprehension with the inquiry, “How, if everything depends upon everything else, can we ever know the cause of anything?”¹⁹⁷ His question lacks a definitive answer, but Carr and Bloch’s works still go far in explaining the past. History is not a physical science and fails to conform to specific laws or equations.¹⁹⁸ Establishing causality and dependency, however, provide many historians with some semblance of relativity, which is a necessary factor in establishing relevance and applicability in historical studies.

In the early 1990s, Utley decided to revisit an academic debate concerning Indian-white struggles in Post-Civil War America. When distilled down to its core elements, the argument

¹⁹² Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 91.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁹⁶ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 93-4.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-5.

ULTIMATE FACTORS  **PROXIMATE FACTORS**

Plains Indians

SOCIAL
Ritualistic Warfare
Zealous Individualism

POLITICAL
Direct Democracy

ECONOMIC
Barter System
Nomadic Pastoralism

War Atrocities & Captives

Strategic Myopia

Solitary Resource Dependence

Lack of Industry

Inter-Tribal Rivalries

Intra-Tribal Disputes

United States

SOCIAL
Nationalism
Divine Providence
Bigotry

POLITICAL
Partisan Politics
Presidential Reconstruction

ECONOMIC
Free Market Economics
Federal Subsidies

Barbarization

Little Bighorn Mythos

Postbellum Military Establishment

Railroad Contracts

Speculative Prospecting

Buffalo Trade

Sheridan's Grand Strategy

Public Ambivalence

Total War

Figure 1: Factors Leading to Sheridan's Pacification of the Great Plains

inarguably supports many aspects of the historiographic causality debate. Titled “Origins of the Great Sioux War: The Brown-Anderson Controversy Revisited,” Utley’s article focuses on the relative merits of two earlier views concerning the root cause of the last major phase of the American Indian Wars.¹⁹⁹ Mark H. Brown argued that the Sioux’s persistent harassment and raiding of white settlements exclusively led to war.²⁰⁰ The recalcitrant Sioux, in Brown’s estimation, sealed their own fate. Harry H. Anderson refuted Brown’s theory by positing that the Black Hills gold rush, among other considerations, caused the Great Sioux War.²⁰¹ Brown was an amateur scholar and former intelligence officer who enjoyed intellectually sparring with academic historians.²⁰² Anderson was a young professor who took issue with Brown’s antiquated diatribes.²⁰³ Both historians were considered credible within the eyes of the academic community. Their published exchange took place over the course of a year, from 1961-62, and is one of the more colorful arguments to grace the pages of an academic journal.”²⁰⁴ Utley cogently sums up the matter by proclaiming that, “Anderson was right. Brown was wrong. But some of Brown’s evidence is worth looking at again...”²⁰⁵

Academic debates aside, the relevant issues here concern causalities, counterfactuals, and the methodology employed by both Brown and Anderson in arriving at their respective conclusions. The former incorrectly supposed that the proximate cause of the Great Sioux War

¹⁹⁹ Robert M. Utley, “Origins of the Great Sioux War: The Brown-Anderson Controversy Revisited,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 4 (Autumn, 1992), 48-9. accessed 2 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4519520>.

²⁰⁰ Mark H. Brown, “A New Focus on the Sioux War,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 11, no. 4, Cowboy and Cattleman's Issue (Autumn, 1961), 84, accessed 2 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4516540>.

²⁰¹ Harry H. Anderson, “Distant Echoes from the Sioux War Camps: A Challenge to Brown's Sioux Indian Wars Thesis,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 12, no. 1 (Winter, 1962), 40, accessed 2 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4516563>.

²⁰² Utley, “Origins of the Great Sioux War,” 48-9.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

was exclusively dependent upon Amerindian depredations, not the lure of Black Hills gold or other influences.²⁰⁶ Anderson instead looked to alternative explanations behind the outbreak of the war, with economic gain serving as a major plank in his academic platform.²⁰⁷ Regardless of merit, each historian argued in the vein of Carr and Bloch while forming their theories. Utley's commentary is ultimately the most comprehensive assessment of the war, as he retrospectively promotes aspects of both papers while interjecting broader considerations into the overall debate.

Take, for instance, his observation concerning intra-tribal conflicts:

A second aspect of the Sioux mind-set may be called the "boys-will-be-boys" syndrome. Chiefs and elders nearly always favored peace, but the young men nearly always favored war. War offered the path to honor, prestige, and preferment. That was how leaders got to be leaders. In the highly democratic and individualistic Indian society, the young men usually did as they pleased, which meant they waged war even when the chiefs urged peace. The chiefs could only shrug and explain that they could not control the young men.²⁰⁸

Utley supports Brown's assertion that violence begets violence. But he takes Brown's logic a step further by illustrating that intra-tribal disputes, which were ultimately influenced by political and social aspirations, also affected the course and outcome of the Great Sioux War. The second half of the present argument is based upon a similar premise.

Ultimate Factors

Returning to the main question of why Sheridan managed to achieve victory on the Plains, despite all the obstacles in his path, first consider how Amerindians exclusively influenced the struggle. Nineteenth-century Plains Indian cultures, like other civilizations, possessed distinct social, political, and economic attributes that gave rise to five specific practices, which ironically contributed to Sheridan's triumph. These customs included zealous individualism, ritualistic warfare, direct democracy, barter economics, and nomadic pastoralism. Intermediate influences, that both derive from a combination of these ultimate factors and additionally influenced the

²⁰⁶ Utley, "Origins of the Great Sioux War," 48-9.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

outcome of Indian-white conflicts, include the committing of war atrocities and the taking of captives, strategic myopia, solitary resource dependence, and a lack of industry. These elements consequently spurred conflicts and friction within and between various tribes, which were some of the most proximate and self-induced factors behind the fall of free tribes.

Amerindian social constructs, such as zealous individualism and ritualistic warfare, distantly and indirectly affected the general outcome of the Great Plains Wars. As cited in the preceding passage, Utley noted that most senior tribal members desired peace.²⁰⁹ War, however, served as one of the few vehicles for social and political advancement in Amerindian society, which frequently motivated many young men to seek glory in combat.²¹⁰ An example of this paradoxical arrangement is illustrated by the life of Red Cloud, an accomplished Oglala Lakota wartime leader.²¹¹ His signing of the second Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868, and subsequent trip to the White House in 1870, heralded a major transition in Indian-white relations. The agreement, in addition to establishing the Great Sioux Reservation, ceded territorial hunting rights to the Sioux and fostered a brief period of peace during an otherwise chaotic era.²¹²

For all his political accomplishments, Red Cloud did not ascend to authority through diplomacy and mediation. The iconic leader instead established himself as a war chief, while fighting white settlers on the Bozeman Trail, during the mid-1860s.²¹³ Red Cloud and Crazy Horse were the primary architects behind the Fetterman Massacre, America's single-most devastating defeat of the Plains Indian Wars prior to the Frontier Army's shocking losses at Rosebud Creek and Little Bighorn.²¹⁴ Leaders like Red Cloud and Crazy Horse, while arguably lacking other

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Utley, "Origins of the Great Sioux War," 49-51.

²¹¹ Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, 125-6.

²¹² U.S. Congress, "Fort Laramie Treaty," April 29, 1868, National Archives, accessed 20 January 2017. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299803>.

²¹³ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 96-101.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 145-51.

options, contributed to a bloody legacy of conflict that gained the respect of their allies but also divided their people. Fierce independence led to internal conflicts and tense rivalries.

Ritualistic warfare was another element of Plains Indian society that, while a fundamental element of tribal culture, caused many strategic and tactical problems on the battlefield. Indians were not opposed to taking lives, but warriors generally tried to embarrass or discredit their opponents rather than killing them.²¹⁵ Many brave men gained considerable fame and fortune through counting coups, or the touching of one's adversary in battle without the intent to kill.²¹⁶ This act was typically performed with an ornate coup stick and intended to demoralize the enemy.²¹⁷ The coup counter would strike his enemy and triumphantly escape to fight another day. His dejected adversary would surrender his arms or return shamefully home.²¹⁸ American soldiers were unfamiliar with this custom and, as was the practice in conventional Western warfare, aimed to kill their enemies through concentrated fire and shock warfare. Some warriors managed to escape unscathed after striking a frontier soldier in the heat of battle, but many were shot dead as they attempted to flee with their coups.²¹⁹

Additional problems with the practice of ritualistic warfare included the taking of war trophies, corpse mutilation, and the seizing of captives. Although an acceptable spiritual and social practice among many Plains Indians, grisly acts like scalping were barbaric by Euromerican standards.²²⁰ The typical Sioux warrior took pride in an extensive collection of scalps, which stood as testament to his combat prowess.²²¹ Mystical customs or rights of vengeance additionally called for the mutilation of a vanquished enemy's body to prevent the spirit from pursuing his assailant

²¹⁵ Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, 151-2.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 151-2.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*, 151-2.

²²⁰ Hedren, "The Contradictory Legacies of Buffalo Bill Cody's First Scalp for Custer," 21.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

in the afterlife.²²² To the horror of white soldiers and settlers, Indians accomplished this task by repeatedly stabbing, slashing, or otherwise disfiguring the bodies of their fallen opponents.²²³ The taking of captives also shocked white emigrants and the eastern public alike. Stories of sexually abused captives petrified or infuriated many Americans.²²⁴

The mutilation and the taking of captives established one of the few instances in which an intermediate cause from one culture influenced a proximate cause in another (Fig 1).²²⁵ Amerindians, by simply following time-honored rituals and customs, fortified America's ethnocentric belief that white Christians were the divine instrument of God, responsible for the purging or conversion of "murderous savages."²²⁶ Sheridan realized this early in his frontier career and routinely tried to sway an unsure American public to his cause.²²⁷ Set on silencing his eastern critics, he routinely shared terrible war stories with the media. Take, for example, Sheridan's recounting of the discovery of a lost scouting party:

[W]e had not gone far before we struck his trail, and soon the whole story was made plain by our finding, on an open level space about two miles from the destroyed village, the dead and frozen bodies of the entire party. The poor fellows were all lying within a circle... and the little piles of empty cartridge shells near each body showed plainly that every man had made a brave fight. None were scalped, but most of them were otherwise horribly mutilated, which fiendish work is usually done by the squaws... Their fate was one that has overtaken many of our gallant army in their efforts to protect the frontiersmen's homes and families from savages who give no quarter, though they have often received it, and where the possibility of defeat in action carries with it the certainty of death and often of preceding torture.²²⁸

Note in the above passage that Sheridan implicates squaws, or non-combatants, in the mutilation of his men. The American people were so appalled by such acts that they even turned on the well-liked "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who took an Indian scalp in avenging the loss of Custer, during the

²²² Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 94-6.

²²³ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*, 329-30.

²²⁴ Glenda Riley, "The Specter of a Savage: Rumors and Alarmism on the Overland Trail," *Western Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (October, 1984), 428-30, accessed 30 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/969452>.

²²⁵ See note 191.

²²⁶ Riley, "The Specter of a Savage," 428.

²²⁷ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 194.

²²⁸ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*, 329-30.

Battle of Warbonnet Creek.²²⁹ Former Western History Association President Glenda Riley accurately sums up the matter by observing that, “Clearly such conduct and the harsh underlying sentiments did nothing to encourage peaceful coexistence or harmonious interaction of populations on the frontier.”²³⁰ The brutality visited upon whites essentially justified cruel vengeance in return, which perpetuated continued violence on the part of the Plains Indians and so forth. The frontier plummeted into a downward spiral of hatred and violence.

Of internal political and economic relevance to the plight of the Plains Indians, were the matters of a vastly decentralized form of direct democracy, barter system economics, and their hereditary nomadic lifestyle. These three practices ultimately contributed to strategic downfalls, solitary resource dependence, and a lack of industry that collectively contributed to Sheridan’s victory in the West. Decentralized government promoted intra-tribal unrest and prevented the formation of a sustained, unified front against the encroaching white frontier.²³¹ As guerrilla fighters, Plains Indians were a force to be reckoned with but were even more fearsome when organized into large coalitions, as was the case with the Sioux and Cheyennes during their stunning victory at the Battle of Little Bighorn.²³² Reliance upon complicated tribal councils, rudimentary economic practices, and pastoral living, however, forced the Plains Indians to primarily wage an irregular and asymmetrical conflict against the United States.²³³ In this regard, a lack of strategic foresight also hurt many tribes. One critical element of fighting a guerilla war, for instance, is gaining the support of the local populace.²³⁴ This was admittedly an uphill battle for the Plains Indians, but they absolutely failed to garner any support or sympathy from western white

²²⁹ Hedren, “The Contradictory Legacies of Buffalo Bill Cody's First Scalp for Custer,” 16.

²³⁰ Riley, “The Specter of a Savage,” 443.

²³¹ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 140.

²³² U.S. Army War College, “Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains, A Review of the American Indian Wars,” 13-5.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 15-6.

²³⁴ Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*, 20.

emigrants, who they routinely terrorized during summer raids. Young warriors were also more concerned with personal glory rather than tactical objectives, which eroded discipline and frequently led to botched ambushes.²³⁵ The Plains Indians theoretically could have achieved greater conventional success under the influence of a centralized form of representational government.

Of final note concerning the tribes of the Great Plains was their solitary dependency on game animals and bison. As pastoral nomads, Plains Indians tracked, hunted, and exclusively relied upon the windfall provided by wild buffalos.²³⁶ The only exceptions were “loafers,” or those who willingly relocated to federal reservations seeking promised subsidies and a more sedentary lifestyle. Some Indians forced to live on these installations were so compelled to take bison that they occasionally ventured off their assigned lands to illegally participate in hunts and raids.²³⁷ Bison were revered spiritually and provided the Plains Indians with food, building materials, clothes, and were a valuable commodity during the height of the buffalo trade.²³⁸ Independent white sutlers, much to the chagrin of Sheridan and the Frontier Army, often exchanged guns and ammunition for furs that they could sell at inflated prices back in eastern cities.²³⁹

This unique dependency on a single resource proved the Achilles heel of the Plains tribes. Whether the army was formally complicit in the near-extirmination of North American buffalos, however, is up to academic debate. Some historians, such as David D. Smits, are of the consensus opinion that policy-makers endorsed an official plan aimed at depriving the Plains Indians of needed bison.²⁴⁰ Academic contrarians, on the other hand, argue that the army realistically lacked

²³⁵ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 145.

²³⁶ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 268; Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 172,

²³⁷ Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, 57.

²³⁸ David D. Smits, “The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Autumn, 1994), 326, accessed 8 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/971110>.

²³⁹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 72.

²⁴⁰ Smits, “The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo,” 312-4.

sufficient resources to effectively mount such a campaign.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, both camps agree that Sheridan realized the value of bison in Amerindian society.²⁴² From participating in organized hunts across the Great Plains, to simply turning a blind eye to illegal poaching on ceded Indians hunting grounds, Sheridan felt little remorse over killing bison.²⁴³ The Plains Indians lost considerable direction and independence once deprived of this valuable resource.

Turning to Euromerican culture practices, factors that ultimately contributed to Sheridan's triumph included nationalism, bigotry, partisan politics, Presidential Reconstruction, and free market economics. Intermediate factors consequent to these elements included the barbarization of Amerindians, the propagation of a Little Bighorn mythos, the formation of a Postbellum military establishment, railroad subsidies, speculative prospecting, and the explosive growth of the buffalo hide industry. These features culminated in the most proximate and influential reasons behind the army's victory, which included America's ambivalent acceptance of Sheridan's brutal grand strategy and total war on the Great Plains.

Out of all the ultimate or more distant reasons that led to Sheridan's victory, nationalism arguably played the most significant role. Consisting of one-part divine providence, one-part bigotry, and one-part patriotic fervor, nationalism propelled millions of Euromericans across the Continental Divide. When Sheridan was still just a boy, the term "Manifest Destiny" gave shape and locomotion to a political policy that originally took shape under President Thomas Jefferson, during the early 1800s.²⁴⁴ At the urging of iconic figures and policy-makers, subsequent generations of Judeo-Christian Euromericans were made to believe that dominating North America

²⁴¹ William A. Dobak, "The Army and the Buffalo: A Demur. A Response to David D. Smits's 'The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883'," *Western Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 199-201, accessed 8 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/970189>.

²⁴² Hedren, *After Custer*, 90-1.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains, A Review of the American Indian Wars," 3.

was a divine mandate and patriotic obligation, which justified a host of unsavory acts.²⁴⁵ The movement established a significant precedent, giving rise to several Indian relocation acts.²⁴⁶ By the time Sheridan's gilded generation of Post-Civil War Americans arrived on the scene, this philosophy was firmly entrenched in the national psyche.

Manifest Destiny unfortunately fostered rampant bigotry during America's rush to claim all the continent. Many Americans found the task of relocating or subduing Indians easier under the pretense that they were dealing with subalterns instead of fellow human beings.²⁴⁷ Humanitarians and social reformers made several strides forward over the years, but racial bias continued to plague even more liberal circles of society. One only need scrutinize the language used in newspaper stories of the day to better understand the reality of their situation. In prophetically discussing the potential of a Sioux uprising during the spring of 1870, one New York Times journalist wrote:

The hostile Sioux are said to be consulting with the peaceable Indians about the advance of the whites upon their hunting-grounds, and some apprehensions have been expressed by parties having practical experience in Indian matters, that should serious difficulties arise the necessities of the peaceably-disposed Indians would be such as to compel them to side with the *hostile savages* [emphasis added].²⁴⁸

The average soldier likely felt justified in his day's work of purging "savages" from an otherwise docile population of compliant Amerindians.

During Reconstruction, many politicians were divided on a variety of issues. Post-war socioeconomic challenges and friction generated by punitive political policies contributed to the establishment of a bitter and partisan environment. Bureaucratic factionalism admittedly did more

²⁴⁵ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 8.

²⁴⁶ U.S. Army War College, "Asymmetrical Warfare of the Great Plains, A Review of the American Indian Wars," 2-7.

²⁴⁷ Hutton, "Phil Sheridan's Frontier," 24.

²⁴⁸ "The Indians: The Question of a General War—the Sioux and the Peaceful Indians. The Brule and Sioux Indians Becoming Obstreperous—General Sheridan Threatens to Take Them in Hand," *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 27, 1870, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*, <http://search.proquest.com/library.norwich.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/92535624/2CE5BB2787494BE1PQ/9?accountid=12871>.

harm than good to the Frontier Army, but two events supplemented the Postbellum war effort and contributed to Sheridan's eventual victory. The first was the Radical Republican backlash that took place in the wake of the Little Bighorn disaster, which placed the blame for an understaffed and ill-quipped army directly on the shoulders of Southern Democrats who feuded with Reconstruction pundits at every turn.²⁴⁹ The tragic loss of Custer and his men was a bittersweet windfall for the U.S. Army, which quickly gained the unanimous support of an enraged nation.²⁵⁰ Despite serving in the Union Army, the flamboyant Custer was something of a cultural icon and well-liked by many members of society.²⁵¹ Reporters and politicians quickly portrayed Custer and his men as valiant victims of an undeserved massacre, promulgating a mythos based upon romantic narratives rather than hard facts.²⁵² Nevertheless, Little Bighorn garnered the entire country's attention, sparked a major political outcry, and forced Congress to pour a massive influx of money and soldiers into the Great Sioux War.²⁵³ Sheridan needed more than boatloads of greenhorn troops to win the Plains, but the infusion of new equipment, men, and forts gave the Frontier Army a competitive edge during desperate times.²⁵⁴

While Congress allocated some much-needed funds to Sheridan and his men, a large swath of Euromericans tried their luck as prospectors, chasing after rumors of gold. In the early 1870s, the U.S. Army mounted an expedition into the Black Hills, with Custer and his Seventh Cavalry in the lead.²⁵⁵ The mission debatably violated several provisions of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, but the Federal Government was desperate.²⁵⁶ Post-war debt saddled the American

²⁴⁹ Dippie, "The Southern Response to Custer's Last Stand," 19.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21-2.

²⁵² Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 317-43.

²⁵³ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 302-3.

²⁵⁴ Hedren, *After Custer*, 6.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

economy, while the financial Panic of 1873 caused a depression on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁵⁷ The Dakota foothills were sacred spiritual territory to the Sioux, who deeply resented white men treading upon their land, so a virtual powder keg exploded when word reached Bismarck that veins of gold coursed through the Black Hills.²⁵⁸ Only months prior to Little Bighorn, the *New York Times* printed a foretelling headline that read, “The New Gold Region: In the Black Hills. Prospecting for Gold and the Results the—Indian Question—Trouble in the Future.”²⁵⁹ Hundreds of white prospectors illegally flooded into the area in search of fame and fortune, which infuriated the Sioux and Cheyennes who later decimated the Seventh Cavalry at Greasy Grass.²⁶⁰ The United States declared war on the Sioux seemingly overnight and set Sheridan loose on the Northern Plains.²⁶¹

Political pocketbooks additionally facilitated the expansion of the railroad; a marvel of American technology despised by the Plains Indians.²⁶² Although planned and built by private companies, the network of railroads that stretched across the Interior was subsidized via federal land grants or lucrative payouts.²⁶³ This stimulus facilitated railroad construction that righted a lopsided Post-Civil War economy, obliterated the Western Frontier, enhanced the tactical capabilities and maneuverability of the Frontier Army, intensified an already exploding buffalo trade, and ultimately destroyed the lives of most independent Amerindian tribes.²⁶⁴ General

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Hedren, *After Custer*, 16-8.

²⁵⁹ “The New Gold Region: In the Black Hills. Prospecting for Gold and the Results the—Indian Question—Trouble in the Future,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), September 7, 1874, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times*, <http://search.proquest.com/library.norwich.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/93399804/C1C93B3A2AB54331PQ/5?aaccountid=12871>.

²⁶⁰ Hedren, *After Custer*, 16-8.

²⁶¹ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 302-3.

²⁶² Ibid., 331-2.

²⁶³ Rick Ewig, “The Railroad and the Frontier West,” *OAH Magazine of History* 3, no. 2, The Frontier (Spring, 1988), 9-10, accessed 14 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40167726>.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Sherman, who preceded Sheridan as the army's senior-most Indian-fighter in West, articulated the strategic value of locomotives. His final report to the White House triumphantly proclaimed:

The Army has been a large factor in producing this result, but it is not the only one. Immigration and the occupation by industrious farmers and miners of lands vacated by the aborigines have been largely instrumental to that end, but the *railroad* which used to follow in the rear now goes the picket-line in the great battle of civilization with barbarism, and has become the *greater* cause.²⁶⁵

Nor was the retiring general's announcement a mere exaggeration. Newspapers reported that Kansas Indians were regularly deprived of vital buffalo herds by professional white hunters who reached their prey via locomotives.²⁶⁶ The Union Pacific Railroad brought white civilization to previously inaccessible parts of Wyoming known as "The Great American Desert."²⁶⁷ By the early 1880s, all the major tribes were confined to reservations, their militant leaders either captured or killed, and Sheridan's men steamed across the Great Plains in the back of railcars.

Conclusion

Clausewitz theorized that, "War is never an isolated act."²⁶⁸ Assuming he lived longer, would the Napoleonic-era Prussian strategist made the same assessment of the Plains Indian Wars? Did a series of conflicts that unraveled more than half a world away, some three decades after Clausewitz's death, validate his dialectic philosophy? The Great Plains Wars satisfied the requirements of the "Clausewitzian Trinity," in that they were a series of conflicts based upon

²⁶⁵ Robert G. Athearn, "General Sherman and the Western Railroads," *Pacific Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (February, 1955), 48, citing "Annual Report of W. T. Sherman," October 27, 1883, 48 Cong., 1 sess., 1, pt. 2 [serial 2182], pp. 45, accessed 14 January 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3635230>.

²⁶⁶ "Miscellaneous Readings. A Buffalo Hunt on the Union Pacific Railroad," *Farmer's Cabinet* 67, no. 22 (Amherst, NH), originally published at *The Farmer's Cabinet*, December 17, 1868, America's Historical Newspapers, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.library.norwich.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=R5FO4BFJMTQ4NTAxNTQ2OS40OTE5ND A6MToxNTToxOTIuMTQ5LjEwOS4yMjQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=3&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=3&p_docnum=3&p_docref=v2:108BD1FCD7E9FA90@EANX-108D97FD0D867E70@2403684-108D97FD21595A80@0-108D97FDECD7C450@Miscellaneous%20Readings.%20a%20Buffalo%20Hunt%20on%20the%20Union%20Pacific%20Railroad.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 84.

public angst, the projection of military power, and political agendas.²⁶⁹ A variety of factors external to the battlefield shaped the course of the conflict. Clausewitz would have likely said the same of the Great Plains Wars.

Sheridan was triumphant because the American people and U.S. Government ambivalently permitted the cavalry officer to wage a total war of destruction against the Plains Indians of the trans-Mississippi West. Total war, however, is only a single, proximate element of the overall equation. Other immediate factors, such as intra-Indian conflict, also contributed to his victory. More distant influences, such as economic and political friction, additionally shaped several intermediary elements of the struggle. In hindsight, Sheridan's success appears almost predetermined. A series of interrelated events seemingly led the Frontier Army and the United States to victory, while resigning the Plains Indians to defeat.

Assuming this predestination theory is valid, the present shares some eerie similarities with Sheridan's times. Many mutually misunderstood social, political, and economic barriers divide today's cultures. Technology, urbanization, and globalization are persistent forces that pack societies into steadily shrinking pockets of coexistence, which occasionally lead to clashes and violence. If struggles are predicated upon a verifiable chain of causality, could such logic be refined into a workable system capable of identifying, mitigating, or even preventing conflict? In an age where total war can be waged with a fleeting keystroke or the impulsive press of a button, such an inquiry deserves further attention. The fate of humanity may very well depend on it.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

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