

---

# When Courage Was Not Enough: Plains Indians at War with the United States Army



Anthony R. McGinnis

---

## Abstract

This article investigates how Indian warriors, using their own specific style of a rather limited warfare, confronted the American newcomers to the Great Plains, particularly the U.S. Army. Plains intertribal warfare bore no resemblance to the “modern” warfare practiced by the Americans, who also had vast advantages in population and resources. The tribes hostile to the whites, for a variety of reasons, continued to pursue their traditional brand of fighting and, therefore, were unable to have any permanent success against the army.

A troop of cavalry about fifty strong stops to camp for the night in the middle of the limitless plains of western Kansas. Nothing is visible except cottonwoods lining a meandering stream, yellowing buffalo grass, and the immense blue horizon stretching in all directions. The troopers tie their horses to a rope line, set up tents near the stream, make cooking fires, and prepare to settle in for the night. Suddenly, without warning, a series of chilling war whoops break the silence and over two hundred mounted Cheyenne Indians break from a nearby shallow gully in an all-out charge.

Hurriedly the soldiers form a ragged line of defense, kneeling or lying down to aim their seven-shot Spencer carbines. Then, when the seemingly unorganized mass of horsemen is within mere feet of the troops, it divides neatly to either side, some warriors hanging to the flanks of their horses to shoot arrows or old sawed-off muskets from underneath the horses' necks. Several soldiers fall wounded.

---

Anthony R. McGinnis is a retired historian and teacher living with his wife Jean in the mountains outside Lyons, Colorado and currently involved in writing, skiing, travel, and other pursuits. He has published the book, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738-1889*, and a number of articles on Indian culture and history.

---

*The Journal of Military History* 76 (April 2012): 455-473.

Copyright © 2012 by *The Society for Military History*, all rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing from the Editor, *Journal of Military History*, George C. Marshall Library, Virginia Military Institute, P.O. Drawer 1600, Lexington, VA 24450. Authorization to photocopy items for internal and personal use is granted by the copyright holder for libraries and other users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 121 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923 USA ([www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)), provided the appropriate fee is paid to the CCC.

Two warriors are shot from their horses. Suddenly some of the raiders are among the hobbled horses rapidly cutting them loose. Some soldiers run to save what horses they can. The war party draws off, then charges again. Groups of two riders expeditiously snatch their fallen comrades to safety while others try to get in amongst the soldiers to kill them or to strike them with a weapon or “coup stick.” To “count coup,” or to get close enough to an enemy to touch or strike him, was the greatest war honor among plains warriors. The Indians return to the safety of the ravine. But one warrior remains. He walks to within one hundred yards of the soldiers and sits on the ground. He then takes out, lights, and calmly smokes a small pipe, while bullets fly dangerously near. Luckily he is not hit and, after thus proving his bravery, he runs zigzagging back to join his comrades. The two sides exchange more long range shots; then it is all over.

Such was a typical skirmish in the wars between the U.S. Army and plains warriors. To the Indians much had been accomplished. Few casualties resulted from the fight. But a number of individuals had distinguished themselves with feats of bravery such as riding dangerously close to the enemy to draw fire or to count coup or to rescue a comrade. They had also managed to capture a few horses. The soldiers, on the other hand, were frustrated. No definite victory resulted from the fight. They were unable to close with and destroy an elusive enemy that had been raiding settlers and stagecoach stations in the area.

But tribal war was nothing like modern warfare. The plains people were divided into tribes numbering several thousand, but they usually lived and traveled in bands of only a few hundred members. While large conflicts for revenge occurred, it was preferable that they were one sided, where a large party could overwhelm a small enemy camp or hunting group. A small nomadic band could not afford to lose large numbers of men upon whom everyone depended for hunting buffalo. Primarily war consisted of raiding for horses and performing brave deeds. This went on almost daily, with war parties traveling throughout the Great Plains. And when the Europeans and Americans arrived on the plains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some tribes added them to their lists of enemies. Ultimately the newcomers found the intertribal warfare to be a detriment to trade and government policy and tried to end it. Also, the army found the individualistic style and unpredictability of tribal combat difficult to handle as a tactical matter.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in facing their new enemies from the “western” world, the plains warriors also encountered a type of warfare very different from their own. Unlike their own individualistic fighting, it dealt in broad strategies and specific unit tactics. Its goal, different from that of tribal bands, was always complete victory. Native fighters, utilizing their traditional methods, could ultimately only meet with defeat. Since tribes fought almost all other tribes, intertribal alliances were not

1. Anthony R. McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738–1889* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010 [1990]). The book deals with the warfare among all the tribes of the area, as well as how it was influenced by Europeans, Americans, and the U.S. government and how it was ended.

usual and were impossible to hold together for long. (Somewhat of an exception on the northern plains was the friendship between the Sioux and the Cheyennes and Arapahos who often joined together to fight enemies like the Pawnees and Crows, as well as the whites. On the southern plains the Comanches and Kiowas and Southern Cheyennes and Southern Arapahos had a similar relationship.) Also, no Indian leaders could or would organize modern disciplined armies that fought a “total” war using trained units. Theirs was a strictly individualistic warfare. A representative set of the two opponents’ incongruous tactics and examples of their battles on the northern and central plains during the violent years of the 1860s and 1870s will illustrate how this disjointed warfare progressed.

The first example is Red Cloud’s War of 1866–67, fought against the forts protecting the Bozeman Trail, linking the Oregon Trail to the Montana goldfields. After two years of skirmishing and a number of engagements the army withdrew its troops from the forts. Red Cloud of the Oglala Sioux, leading the hostiles, became the only plains chief to win a war against the United States, although this victory never did completely stop prospectors from getting to Montana. Red Cloud led a diverse group of warriors representing members of the Miniconjou, Brulé, Sans Arc, and Oglala Lakota tribes, as well as some Northern Cheyennes and Northern Arapahos. They were determined to keep the whites out of the Powder River country of present day northern Wyoming, land that in recent decades they had worked at taking from the Crow tribe. Colonel Henry B. Carrington’s 18th Infantry Regiment had built Fort Phil Kearny in northeastern Wyoming in the summer of 1866, and throughout the summer and fall hostile Indians constantly, but rather ineffectively, harassed the troops.

Then things changed in December when a great war party numbering in the hundreds arrived from the big Sioux camp on the Tongue River to the northwest and was able to inflict a crushing defeat on the army. On December 21 Carrington sent the arrogant Captain William J. Fetterman (who had boasted that with 100 men he could ride through the entire Sioux nation) and eighty men to defend a wood cutting party being attacked outside the fort. Several Sioux warriors, led by the famous Crazy Horse, were then able to use their favorite “decoy” tactic to lure Fetterman into an ambush on a ridge out of sight of the fort. The hostiles had used the decoy method several times in the past few days and weeks without success. This time it worked. Following the decoys, who played their roles perfectly, the military column became strung out on reaching a narrow ridge, with the cavalry riding far ahead. When they were all in the ambush zone, hundreds of warriors sprang from hiding along the steep sides of the ridge and attacked. First they surrounded the infantry. The foot soldiers managed to reach the protection of some large rocks. But this was of little help, as the swarming mass of warriors overran them. The cavalry tried moving up hill, most of them dismounted for defense. They also did not last long, as the warriors smothered their resistance within minutes. All of Fetterman’s command lay dead.

This was a great victory although the tribesmen suffered losses. Various estimates at as few as fifteen to as many as fifty, many of these losses probably were

due to two civilians accompanying the troops who had Henry repeating rifles. The small cavalry unit had breech loading Spencer carbines, but most of the soldiers were still armed with muzzle loading rifles and were sometimes overwhelmed as they reloaded. Battles of this size occurred in tribal war when the war party had a huge numerical advantage such as in this instance, an advantage magnified by the division of the soldiers into smaller groups. This edge in numbers certainly helped, because the warriors fought only as individuals. The only plans made were placing men from different tribes in ambush positions and deciding on a signal to attack. Another reason for the ferocity of the Indian attack was that the warriors believed that they possessed good "medicine." Medicine meant good luck or, more accurately, spiritual power. Individuals obtained their own medicine in a variety of ways, but in this case a respected Miniconjou "berdash," a man who dressed and acted like a woman, had experienced a vision implying that 100 soldiers would fall into the warriors' hands. Armed with this prophecy, the warriors were supremely confident.<sup>2</sup>

After the fight, having time before the arrival of reinforcements from the fort, the warriors systematically mutilated the enemy dead, one of the least admirable customs of Indian warfare. The men cut off heads and limbs, stripped muscles from bones, disemboweled bodies, and arranged them in "humorous" ways. Often with the participation of women and children if they were nearby, mutilation was used as a macabre joke but also as the ultimate revenge, because Plains Indian peoples believed that the dead entered the afterlife in the final form they exited it. Mutilation was abhorred by most whites, but there were also plenty of incidents of soldiers mutilating the Indian dead, not the least example being the carrying off of Indian body parts following the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado two years earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The Fetterman fight was not the most typical type of battle in tribal war; the Hayfield Fight and Wagon Box Fight in August of 1867 were more common exemplars of Indian combat. They also illustrate the difficulties Indian warriors had when confronting barricaded and well armed soldiers. Still feeling that their medicine was potent after the Fetterman victory, Red Cloud and another major Oglala chief, Man Afraid of His Horses, planned more attacks. What made the discipline of modern warfare difficult, if not impossible, for plains people was the fact that no warrior took orders from any leader. Rather, they followed a leader if he was successful and possessed strong medicine. Therefore, in early August 1867, when no one could agree on one main military objective to attack, the warriors split, with one group attacking a hay mowing party near Fort Smith fifty miles

2. John D. McDermott, *Red Cloud's War: The Bozeman Trail, 1866-1868*, 2 vols. (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2010), 1: 201-29; George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 234-44; Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 110-16; Anthony McGinnis, "Strike and Retreat: Intertribal Warfare and the Powder River War, 1865-1868," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* (Autumn 1980): 37-38.

3. McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 28-29.

northwest of Fort Phil Kearny near the Big Horn River, and the other attacking a wood cutting party near the fort.

When a large war party arrived at the hayfield six civilians and nineteen soldiers hurriedly assembled the mowing machines into a defensive circle. For several hours the warriors charged the barricades, riding close in to the mowers to shoot and show their bravery. Fortunately for the soldiers, a week before the two fights Springfield rifles, modified to be breech loading instead of muzzle loading, had arrived at the fort. One Indian technique was to ride close along the soldiers' front to draw fire, then quickly attack again while the defenders reloaded. Now, at the hayfield, the ability to fire more continuously allowed the few defenders to drive off the horde of attackers relatively easily after a few futile charges.

The next day Red Cloud led a large force, sometimes estimated at well over 1,000 warriors, against the wood cutting party working in an open area six miles from Fort Phil Kearny. Some Sioux women came along to watch. The woodcutters had used wagon wheels and their frames to carry logs from the forest, but on arrival the men had removed the wagon boxes from the wheels and placed them in an oval enclosure, along with strategically placed ammunition boxes (for their remodeled Springfield breech loading rifles), for protection in case of attack. The precaution was fortuitous; when the war party appeared and ran off the party's mules, the twenty-eight soldiers and four civilians quickly ran for cover behind their barricade.

Captain James W. Powell, commanding, estimated that about 500 warriors came in the initial thundering charge, filled with yelling, shooting, and dust. The soldiers' continuous fire surprised the Sioux. Like their comrades at the Hayfield Flight, they had expected the old muzzle-loading rifles that gave them an opportunity to overrun the enemy. The Sioux warrior, Fire Thunder, described the shockingly unexpected experience:

They were lying behind the boxes and they shot faster than they ever shot before. We thought it was some new medicine gun of great power... we meant to ride right over them and rub them out. But our ponies were afraid of the ring of fire of the guns. Our women were watching from the hills and we could hear them singing and mourning for us whenever the shooting stopped. We tried hard but we could not do it, and there were dead warriors and horses piled all around the boxes and scattered all over the plain.<sup>4</sup>

Nonplussed, the warriors then tried a massive attack on foot, emerging from a nearby ravine. Private Samuel Gibson remembered the fearsome attack:

Suddenly there was a cry from the west end of the corral: "Here they come!" We all looked in that direction, and saw a sight which none of those yet alive will ever forget to their dying day. It chilled my blood at the time. We saw the naked bodies of hundreds upon hundreds of Indians swarming up a ravine about ninety yards to the

4. McDermott, *Red Cloud*, 2:426.

west of the corral. They were on foot, formed in the shape of letter V, or wedge and were led by Red Cloud's nephew, [Lone Man] who wore a gorgeous war bonnet. Immediately we opened a terrific fire upon them, under which nothing could stand, and at the first volley Red Cloud's nephew fell, pierced by many bullets. Not daunted, the forces came on slowly, and in great numbers, the place of those who fell under our fire being taken immediately by others. So close were the Indian hordes by this time that the heavy rifle bullets from our guns must have gone through two or three bodies. They were so near us that we could even see the whites of their eyes.<sup>5</sup>

Again, the soldiers turned back the attackers with their breech loading rifles. In later years Red Cloud named them the "much talk" guns. The Lakotas made no more massive charges. Sporadic shooting continued for a while. Warriors now took even greater risks than their earlier charges, in trying to rescue their dead and wounded comrades. Eventually a relief force arrived from the fort and the war party withdrew. Three soldiers had died. Captain Powell estimated that his men killed sixty or more attackers, probably an inflated figure. Both sides hailed this as a victory. The soldiers had successfully fought off several desperate assaults. But while the Lakotas mourned their losses, they also had some cause for celebration. In addition to continuing to deny the white men the free use of the Bozeman Trail, in this fight many men had accomplished brave deeds. One warrior, Jipala, had shown the greatest courage of all by calmly striding almost right up to the wagon boxes, stopping, and firing arrow after arrow into the soldiers' enclosure before falling dead under a hail of bullets.<sup>6</sup>

Any Indian celebration overlooked the reality of this new warfare with the white man. Their individualistic warfare would ultimately be of no use in protecting their lands and way of life from the invaders. With different tactics, such as some kind of fire and maneuver using small units, the native warriors could have overrun the greatly outnumbered soldiers, but those tactics were antithetical to their way of war. No chain of command existed. No war party leader or chief could order any man to fight or be part of a coordinated maneuver if he chose not to. Men fought as they wished to in order to gain personal glory. In fact, some warriors simply watched this fight, probably because they believed that their medicine was not strong on that particular day. Most men did not foresee the need to change tactics. Some leaders, like Red Cloud and others, often recognized the need to change, but they were not consistent in this thinking and they probably could not have permanently changed their men's tactics anyway.

At the same time that hostilities were heating up along the Bozeman Trail they were also breaking out in the central plains of Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado. The Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado in November of 1864 enraged the tribes

5. *Ibid.*, 2:431.

6. *Ibid.*, 2:424–33; Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 109–10; Andrist, *Long Death*, 128–31; McGinnis, "Strike and Retreat," 39–40.

and resulted in extensive raiding on the central plains, as well as to the north. Treaties made in 1866 did help to decrease raiding, and the plains were somewhat quiet for a time. This changed in 1867 and 1868. More Americans entered the central plains, homeland and hunting ground of the southern Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos. The newcomers sometimes followed the new Smoky Hill Trail to Colorado, or stayed to homestead in Kansas, or worked at stage stations, or on the Union Pacific Eastern Division Railroad, soon to become the Kansas Pacific. At this juncture, despite the relative calm of the area, Kansas Governor Samuel Crawford, suspicious of Indians and fearing future trouble, called for more troops to protect the state's growing population. The increased number of whites, the presence of more troops, along with the hostile intent of warriors looking to make names for themselves, exacerbated an already tense situation.

In the spring of 1867 the well known Civil War general, Winfield Scott Hancock, led an army of 1400 men into the region. When he reached western Kansas he encountered a village of Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. The Dog Soldiers were a Cheyenne warrior society which tended to be hostile toward the whites and had evolved into almost a separate tribe, going their own way and camping together. When Hancock met them near their village he was in a pugnacious mood, assuming that the Dog Soldiers were responsible for recent raids in the area. The famous Northern Cheyenne warrior Roman Nose was then living with the Dog Soldier band led by his good friend Bull Bear. At the meeting Roman Nose told Bull Bear that he was going to kill Hancock. His friend talked him out of it, fearing for the safety of the women and children in the nearby camp. Roman Nose did, however, lightly slap Hancock on the face. The general did not realize that the warrior had technically just counted coup on him. Later, after the meeting and growing alarmed at what they thought were the soldiers' hostile intentions, the Indians vacated the camp and fled. Highly suspicious, Hancock sent his subordinate, Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer, to locate the fleeing Indians. The Indians had disappeared, but Custer did find burned out stage stations on the Smoky Hill Trail. When Hancock learned of this he had the Dog Soldier village burned in retaliation, although the attacks on the stations had actually been made by Sioux war parties coming from the north.<sup>7</sup>

The mounting tension on both sides helped lead to intense warfare on the central plains between 1867 and 1869. Although some chiefs like Black Kettle of the Southern Cheyennes wanted peace, this state of tension certainly was welcomed by the young men. Only through war, not peace, could a man gain prestige with his people. Hancock's aggressive posturing also helped to insure continued fighting. With the Medicine Lodge Treaty in October of 1867 the central and southern plains tribes, at least those chiefs who signed it, gave up their control of the central plains; but the treaty did nothing to halt the raiding.

Through 1867 and 1868 the Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Sioux all raided through southern Nebraska and northern Kansas, as they sought to protect their

7. John H. Monnett, *The Battle of Beecher Island and the Indian War of 1867-1869* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1992), 34-46, 50-53.

hunting grounds along the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers against the growing encroachment of settlers, railroads, and emigrant trails. The raiding was typical of tribal warfare. It concentrated on small objectives that could gain the men war honors, horses, and loot without incurring high risks. Many of the attacks were against stage stations and railroad workers along the Platte River Trail and the Smoky Hill Trail. But settlers suffered the worst. War parties sought out isolated homesteaders, particularly along the Saline, Solomon, and Republican rivers of northern Kansas and southern Nebraska. Hostile Indians killed 128 whites in 1867. Eighteen sixty-eight was just as bad, and it continued into 1869.

The Indians made surprise attacks of quick brutality. They surprised men who were out working in their fields and tomahawked them, then ran down women and children around their cabins. Women and children could be brutally killed or taken captive. Captured women were usually raped and in some cases made to live with families, sometimes as sort of secondary wives, sometimes in a state of virtual slavery. This hit and run warfare allowed the men to easily gain war honors (even counting coup on a woman was a war honor), steal horses, and take captives. Tribes adopted many captives, although this was more common with women or children from another tribe than with white captives. This was the warfare of the plains: limited in scope but cruel by nature, and based on the belief that anyone outside one's own tribe was fair game for any abuse.<sup>8</sup>

On February 29, 1868, Major General Philip Sheridan, a Civil War officer equally as famous as Hancock, replaced him as Department of the Missouri commander. Determined to enforce the recent treaty and government policy which were supposed to keep the tribes south of the Arkansas River or north of the Platte River, Sheridan followed an aggressive policy toward all the hostiles. First, he determined to seek out and attack Indian villages, especially in the winter when the tribes were sedentary, more vulnerable, and could be more easily located and defeated. Eventually this tactic resulted in Custer's victory at the Battle of the Washita in western Indian Territory (future state of Oklahoma) in November, 1868 which did have some effect on slowing down the raiding. In this fight, before fleeing their camp, the Indians killed Clara Blinn and her baby, who had been captured along the Santa Fe Trail in October. Such was usually the fate of captives in an attack on a village.

Sheridan also started planning a strategy of convergence, where several army units from different directions converged on the homelands of hostile tribes in order to force them into conclusive battles. Various cavalry regiments, the 5th, 7th, and 10th, together with volunteer militias from Kansas, were soon scouring the plains. Finally, Sheridan experimented with creating a small "strike force" of civilian frontier "plainsmen" who had the ability to travel more easily on the vast flatlands and provide intelligence to locate hostile bands. Major George Alexander Forsyth, with the assistance of First Lieutenant Frederick H. Beecher, recruited

8. *Ibid.*, 55–65; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, x, 42–43, 63, 115.



and led this band of fifty “scouts” or “rangers.” The government paid \$75 a month to a man who had a horse and \$50 a month to a man without a mount.<sup>9</sup>

In August and September of 1868, this small force moved from Ft. Hays, Kansas, to Ft. Wallace near the Colorado border, then followed a large trail of raiders who had attacked a train of freight wagons. They followed the trail along the Arickaree fork of the Republican River until, on September 16, they arrived at a small valley about fifteen miles south of present day Wray, Colorado. At this point the scouts were very close to the hostiles; the Indians were settled in three camps, of Brulé Sioux, Northern Arapahos, Dog Soldiers, and Northern Cheyennes, just twelve miles away. Before dawn the next day the warriors attacked, rushing first to drive off the horses. Forsyth’s men took cover on a small island in the mostly dry creek bed and began to dig protective trenches. Some warriors began to sneak through the tall grass bordering the riverbed to capture or else kill the horses or to count coup. Later in the day the Indians unleashed several charges consisting of hundreds of mounted warriors, a frightening sight for the small band of rangers. Most horsemen split and rode on either side of the island, but some, like Bad Heart, charged right through the defenders and survived. Other warriors circled the island or crept up on foot to shoot or to rescue wounded or dead friends. Ultimately, suffering a few casualties, the scouts were able to fight off the Indians using their seven-shot Spencer carbines. The recollections of Sigmund Shlesinger, one of Forsyth’s young scouts, illustrate how terrifying the warriors’ attacks could be:

They seemed to spring from the ground....I will frankly admit that I was frightened almost out of my senses. I felt as if I wanted to run somewhere, but every avenue of escape seemed closed.<sup>10</sup>

Roman Nose happened to be staying in one of the camps. He did not intend to fight. His medicine, concocted by a holy man named Ice, forbade him to come into contact with iron. Unaware, on a previous day he had eaten food that a woman had prepared using the white man’s metal utensils. When he learned of this, Roman Nose believed his medicine had been rendered ineffective until it could be “repaired.” Then, after the initial attacks, some men questioned and made light fun of Roman Nose’s lack of activity. Stung by the jests but also believing that he would die, Roman Nose led the last charge and was shot in the back and killed while riding past a scout hidden in the grass along the riverbank. Sporadic fighting continued for another day. Forsyth sent men who sneaked out in the dark to go to Ft. Wallace for help. Eventually the Indians departed, having had their fill of fighting. On September 25, 10th Cavalry troops arrived to rescue the Forsyth scouts.<sup>11</sup>

The Battle of Beecher Island embodied all the elements present in battles on the plains. Of the fifty scouts, five died and eighteen were wounded. The number of Indian casualties varies with the sources but was probably relatively light—somewhere between nine, according to the tribesmen, and higher, sometimes

9. Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 52–55, 81–82; Monnett, *Beecher Island*, 60–61, 112–19.

10. Monnett, *Beecher Island*, 132.

11. *Ibid.*, 131–50; Hutton, *Sheridan*, 46–7.

inflated, figures. The primary thing learned from the battle was that heroic tactics did not have much chance of success against well armed and entrenched opponents. The warriors were satisfied with taking a few horses and achieving some impressive war honors—recklessly charging the island, counting coup, and rescuing comrades. The loss of Roman Nose was a tragedy, but was easily explained by his broken medicine. In general the battle had been a success in terms of tribal warfare but certainly had no influence on deterring American settlers.

After Beecher Island, the army and the Kansas volunteers kept up the pressure against the hostiles of the central plains. The Dog Soldiers, under Tall Bull, remained in the vicinity of the Republican River drainage and continued to raid in Kansas. Through the fall of 1868 troops hunted the elusive tribesmen, and in November Custer attacked the village on the Washita River in present day Oklahoma. In Kansas Major Eugene A. Carr's 5th Cavalry, and part of the 10th Cavalry under Captain Louis H. Carpenter, continued to chase the elusive Dog Soldiers. Finally in July of 1869 came success. Carr's regiment, led by the Pawnee Scouts, found Tall Bull's village south of the South Platte River near present day Sterling, Colorado. The Pawnee Scouts had been formed in 1864 by Major Frank North. Whenever possible the army used such traditional tribal enemies of the hostiles to find and defeat them. (By the 1870s even some warriors from the hostile tribes signed on to scout for the army against their own brethren.) The Pawnee Scouts were enthusiastic participants in these campaigns because it gave them chances for revenge on their old and domineering enemies.

In the afternoon of July 11, 1869 the Pawnees and soldiers surprised the camp. Some Cheyennes escaped on horseback; others took shelter in a nearby ravine. The Pawnees and soldiers surrounded the ravine and fired into it, killing fifty-two people including Tall Bull. The soldiers found two captives in the camp: Mrs. Maria Weichell, alive though badly hurt, and Mrs. Susanna Alderice, dead from a tomahawk blow, delivered possibly by Tall Bull or his wife. This Battle of Summit Springs was a devastating defeat for the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. It demonstrated how the Indian village, seldom guarded, was vulnerable to attack. The battle also included a good example of the common naïveté of some warriors in fighting a modern army. In the thick of the fighting at the ravine, Wolf with Plenty of Hair actually "staked" himself down to die bravely without recourse of retreat. Often referred to as "Crazy Dogs," warriors of this sort often "tied" themselves with ropes staked to the ground to illustrate their refusal to retreat in battle. When the Crazy Dog was not really serious about committing suicide, as some were, there was an escape clause to this vow. The promise ceased with the end of the raiding season in winter; also a friend could come and "release" the Crazy Dog when the enemy got too close. No records exist of Wolf with Plenty of Hair's exact intentions, but no one came to release him, so he died a heroic but fruitless death. This kind of military thinking was what precluded native people from mounting any serious or effective military defense of their land.<sup>12</sup>

12. Monnett, *Beecher Island*, 183–91; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 99, 101.

In the late 1860s and the 1870s Sheridan's strategies of winter campaigning, converging bodies of troops, and actively seeking out and attacking villages began to pay off. The Battle of Summit Springs significantly limited the power of the Dog Soldiers on the central plains. In 1874–75 during the Red River War, five army columns converged on the panhandle of Texas, homeland of the Comanches and Kiowas. They attacked Indian villages settled in for winter, especially a large one in Palo Duro Canyon. The defeat of the Comanches and Kiowas illustrated an important part of Sheridan's strategy: to destroy the Indians' economy. Few Indians were killed in the attack on the camp hidden in the great Palo Duro Canyon. However, their tipis and food were burned and their horses killed. This, along with the recent destruction of most of the southern buffalo herds by hide hunters, impoverished them and forced them onto the reservation in Indian Territory. The implementation of this strategy effectively ended the power of these southern plains tribes.

Next, Sheridan turned his convergence method to the northern plains where many of the Lakota Sioux tribes, together with allied Northern Cheyennes and Northern Arapahos, still raided and refused to live on the reservations set up under President Grant's Peace Policy. In the early 1870s Americans began to encroach on Sioux hunting territory which, according to the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1868, had been set aside for their use in Wyoming and Montana, generally to the west of their reservations in Dakota Territory. Railroad surveyors for the Northern Pacific, guarded by soldiers, entered Montana. In 1874 troops under Custer made an exploratory expedition into the Black Hills of South Dakota. The newcomers happened to discover gold, which led to white prospectors flooding into this land which was sacred to the Sioux. The United States government tried to buy the land but the Indians refused. Then, with the Sioux already furious at these encroachments, the government stepped up its aggressive policy even more by calling all tribesmen to come in to their reservations or else be considered hostile. The recalcitrant hostile Sioux and their allies refused.

This situation led to the Great Sioux War, starting with the invasion of the heart of Sioux hunting ground by three converging columns of troops. Under Sheridan's plan Major General Alfred Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, moved west from Fort Abraham Lincoln at Bismarck on the Missouri River. Most of the force was made up of the 7th Cavalry under Custer. Brigadier General George Crook, commander of the Department of the Platte, was to move north from Fort Fetterman on the North Platte River in Wyoming. Colonel John Gibbon, commanding the third column, moved eastward along the Yellowstone River from Ft. Ellis in southwestern Montana. All three prongs were to meet on the Yellowstone River at the mouth of the Bighorn River in southern Montana. They were to round up or defeat the hostiles. Ultimately this campaign led to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and in the following year the surrender of most of the hostiles.<sup>13</sup>

13. Hutton, *Sheridan*, 246–58, 302–30; Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 321–41.

However, before and after this campaign, numerous altercations took place between war parties and soldiers. One interesting incident occurred on August 14, 1872 on the Yellowstone River at the mouth of the Tongue River in eastern Montana. Oglala and Hunkpapa Lakotas under Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were harassing a Northern Pacific Railroad survey party under the protection of troops commanded by Colonel D. S. Stanley. Like much of such fighting, this brief encounter was fairly uneventful in the greater scope of things. But after a few hours of flamboyant charges, the two leaders engaged in a typical impromptu competition to see who was the bolder. First, Sitting Bull casually walked out to within range of the soldiers' rifles, calmly sat down, lit his pipe and smoked it while bullets whizzed around him; then just as casually he sauntered back to safety. Not to be outdone, Crazy Horse charged right up to the soldiers' lines. The soldiers immediately shot his horse out from under him, but Crazy Horse was able to run to safety.<sup>14</sup>

Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, as much as any other Indian leaders, realized the true threat of whites moving into their lands. Over the years, they had witnessed the insidious growth of settlements and wagon trains. They had seen how the numbers of whites appeared endless. Both men fought many engagements with the whites, after having made their war reputations early in life fighting against tribal enemies such as the Crows and Pawnees. They knew that new tactics were necessary to oppose the American threat. Yet they were still subject to the rules of their own way of war. And they still enjoyed the playful but deadly competition that their warfare implemented. Ultimately, though Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and a few other leaders understood the inequities of their style of war when opposed to that of the soldiers, they were unable to change intertribal warfare in order to better match up with the U.S. Army.

The Bighorn Campaign of the spring and summer of 1876 included two large battles—the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17 and the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25. Both of them demonstrated the tribal tactics employed for large engagements. When General Crook met the hostiles on the Rosebud he had 1300 men under him, including Crow allies and Shoshonis under the famous Chief Washakie. The hostiles, led by Crazy Horse, numbered somewhere between fewer than 1,000 to upwards of 1,500, depending on the various estimates. The war party, on leaving for the battle, made a traditional circle around the large encampment while the women sang songs of encouragement. Upon arriving upriver at the soldier camp, the Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos attacked in mass soon after the soldiers left their camp. It was a confused battle. Crook was unable to bring together his entire force through much of the battle, and he was also slow to move up his troops in the beginning, while the Crows and Shoshonis aggressively fought off the enemy attack. Historians have often seen this battle as different from other attacks by plains warriors. And, indeed it was fiercely contested, as both forces charged back and forth, first one side then the other being driven back.

14. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1975), 26.

The battle was fairly chaotic, broken up into scattered groups, as the troops were unable to form their usual line of battle. In reality, though, this battle was very much in line with the Indians' preferred way of fighting, a fact helped by there being Indian warriors on both sides. The hostiles were able to maneuver at high speed in between the separated groups of soldiers in order to count coup, fire at close range, and perform their deeds of skill and daring. Few casualties resulted, considering that some 2,000 to 3,000 men were involved.

The Indians remembered the battle as they always did—by associating it with the personal exploits. A Cheyenne woman, Buffalo Calf Road, was a major participant, a rare but not unknown occurrence for women. She also saved her brother, Chief Comes in Sight. When his horse was shot by the Crows she charged into the mass of skirmishing warriors and carried him to safety on the back of her horse. The warriors cheered her. Ever afterward the Cheyennes called the battle, "Where the Girl Saved Her Brother." The Miniconjou White Bull, a nephew of Sitting Bull, later recounted his actions at the Rosebud to the historian Stanley Vestal. White Bull emphasized how he had prepared his "medicine bag" (containing the paraphernalia for his spiritual protection) before the battle. He explained how he had competed with an allied Cheyenne warrior, each one of them trying to ride out in front and lead the initial charge. He also shot a Shoshoni from his horse and then "lamed" him with his tomahawk. Years later White Bull learned from the Crows, while reminiscing with his old enemies, that this had been a particularly brave Shoshoni.

Young John Two Moon, nephew of the Northern Cheyenne chief, Two Moon, remembered how when his horse gave out and he was chased on foot by soldiers he had been saved by White Shield—jumping up behind him on his horse. Crows enjoyed reminiscing about the amusing humiliation of Jack Red Cloud, son of the Oglala chief, but apparently not much of a warrior. When Jack's horse was shot he tried to run away instead of face his enemies. The Crows did not kill him but rode alongside, lashing him (a coup) and laughing at him for his lack of bravery. This reminiscing about bygone days of a game-like competition, even between old enemies, was a key part of reservation life in later years. But it was not at all like the kind of memories shared by soldiers in modern armies. The Battle of the Rosebud had been hard fought, but it was still a plains Indian type battle. It was heated, violent, and filled with individual competition and bravery, but light on casualties. Yet it was quite inconclusive in terms of any kind of decisive battle according to the tenants of modern warfare. Crook thought he did not have adequate supplies to pursue the hostiles, so he soon returned south. The Indians allies had already left. They had suffered few casualties, but they were not satisfied with the way the whites soldiers had carried on the fight.<sup>15</sup>

15. James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn— the Last Great Battle of the American West* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008), 147–155; Robert Kammen, Joe Marshall, and Frederick Lefthand, *Soldiers Falling into Camp: The Battles at the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn* (Encampment, Wyoming: Affiliated Writers of America/Publishers, 1992),

The Battle of the Little Big Horn, the most famous battle of all the plains Indian engagements, was like the Fetterman Battle in that the Indians ended up with a great advantage in numbers and were willing to have a fight to the finish. Custer, like other commanders, saw the advantage of attacking an Indian camp. Most of the army's successes had come from doing this. It had been especially effective at the Battles of the Washita and Palo Duro Canyon. In fact, after the Custer battle, despite the success of the hostiles, their days were numbered. In late 1876 and early 1877 the continuing convergence strategy defeated the remaining hostiles in their camps, except Sitting Bull and his followers who fled to Canada for four years. On November 25, 1876, 1100 soldiers under Colonel Ranald MacKenzie surprised the Cheyenne camp of Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf in the Bighorn Mountains. The Indians, with forty dead, fled into a winter snow storm while their camp burned. They then sought refuge with Crazy Horse. On January 8, 1877, Colonel Nelson Miles attacked Crazy Horse's village at Wolf Mountain near the Tongue River and successfully defeated him. Surprised in their winter camps when they were short of supplies and had limited freedom of movement, the Indians had little chance. As a result, in the spring they began to return to their agencies and surrender. The convergence strategy and attacks on vulnerable Indian camps had been successful.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Battle of the Little Bighorn was the high point for the hostile tribes in the Sioux campaign, before they reached the turning point in their fortunes. Custer, as he approached the huge Indian encampment on the Little Bighorn River, had reason to believe he had had a stroke of good fortune, despite the misgivings of his Crow scouts. Before, when soldiers had surprised Indian villages, the inhabitants had fled and the warriors were forced to fight rear guard actions in order to protect the women and children. This time they did not run. The large camp, stretching about one and a half miles along the Greasy Grass, or Little Bighorn River, included representatives from all seven Lakota tribes, and some eastern Sioux, together with Northern Arapahos and Northern Cheyennes.

Historical estimates of the size of the village and the number of warriors have varied widely over the years, from as many as 10,000 to 12,000 people and 3,000 to 4,000 warriors to as few as 800 to 1200 warriors in more recent research.<sup>17</sup> Custer's divided forces totaled about 225 men under his command, 165 under Major Marcus

---

4–10; John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 120–23; Andrist, *Long Death*, 262–67; Jerome A. Greene, ed., *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 15–30; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 134–35.

16. Paul L. Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle: How the United States Army Waged War on the Northern Plains, 1876–1877* (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2011), 141–43, 147–48; Utley, *Indian Frontier*, 184–86; Jerome A. Greene, ed., *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877: The Military View* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 167–203.

17. Cyrus T. Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters* (New York: McClure, Philips & Co., 1904; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 234, 238, 259; Bruce Vandervort, *Indian*

A. Reno, and 115 under Captain Frederick Benteen. Regardless of the varied estimates of Indian numbers, during each of the two parts of the battle that included aggressive Indian attacks—first against Reno and then against Custer—the Indians greatly outnumbered the soldiers. They were moving rapidly across the battlefield to concentrate large numbers against smaller groups of soldiers.

In winning this great victory the Sioux and their allies fought in their traditional style of war with all its embellishments. In one instance, as Reno's men neared the upper end of the camp, the young Northern Cheyenne, Wooden Leg, paused to dress and paint himself according to his medicine. His father, retired from war as was often the custom when one's son came of age, fetched his son's horse and warned him of the urgency of the situation. But Wooden Leg refused to be hurried and carefully finished his preparations. A man had to follow his medicine, including the details of dress, in order to be safe as well as successful in war. One Cheyenne, Lame White Man, hurriedly ran out to fight dressed only in his breechcloth, not taking the time to dress appropriately for battle. Consequently, some of his comrades believed he had been mistaken for an Arikara scout and killed, or at least scalped, by the Sioux. The great Sitting Bull, also partially retired from war, helped prepare his adopted son One Bull for the fight, even giving him his own shield which was apparently powerful medicine in itself. One Bull had been born an Assiniboin but had been captured as a child and raised as a Miniconjou.

In this particular battle the warriors also felt they possessed strong medicine in addition to their individual spiritual power. Several days earlier Sitting Bull had had 100 pieces of skin and flesh cut from both arms as a sacrifice for the annual Sun Dance. Afterward he experienced a vision that showed numerous soldiers and horses falling dead into the Sioux village. Soon after, at the Battle of the Rosebud, this prophecy had encouraged the warriors. But at the Little Bighorn, with soldiers attacking the camp, the vision actually appeared to be coming true and certainly inspired a wave of warlike enthusiasm.<sup>18</sup>

When Reno and his command reached the valley of the Little Bighorn and charged the southern end of the camp they found, not a panicked village fleeing, but hundreds of swarming Indians. The troops, vastly outnumbered, fell back into the timber by the river and then made a headlong retreat in the other direction, trying to re-cross the river to safety. The disorganized battalion, having lost over fifty men, finally reached a nearby hill. Benteen and his command eventually met

---

*Wars of Mexico, Canada, and the United States, 1812–1900* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 182; Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula, Mont.: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997), 1–20. Michno has made an impressive interpretation of Indian memories of the battle to show a much smaller number of people in the village than previously believed.

18. Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 172, 293; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 141; Thomas B. Marquis, ed., *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 199–200; Robert M. Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993), 150, 137–38.

them there and they all dug into a defensive perimeter. When the Indians had finished mutilating and looting the dead by the river they went up the hill, charged the fortified soldiers, and then commenced long range shooting at them. Because of the defensive position the soldiers suffered few additional casualties, as was typical of this kind of warfare when defenders fortified themselves.

The retreat across the river had been a different matter, as the Indians closely chased the panicked troopers. With their great advantage in numbers, the warriors rode in amongst the troopers, counting coup and grabbing their weapons and sometimes killing them. Wooden Leg and his friend Little Bird chased one soldier, riding on either side of him and counting coup by hitting him with their whips. Wooden Leg knocked him from his horse and stole his carbine but did not shoot him. According to Wooden Leg, he had already gained two war honors – counting coup and taking a weapon. Therefore, “It seemed not brave to shoot. Besides, I did not want to waste my bullets.” Reno would have lost many more men if the warriors had just killed their opponents rather than concentrating so much on individual feats of bravery. But in intertribal war, counting coup was much more important, and braver, than simply killing an opponent from a distance with a bullet.<sup>19</sup>

While Reno attacked the village at the south end, Custer led his battalion along the bluffs parallel to the river, apparently intent on attacking the other end of the camp. He sent part of his command, under Captain George W. Yates, down Medicine Tail Coulee, a wide drainage entering the river from the southeast. A number of Lakotas and Cheyennes met them close to the river. Soon, increasing numbers of men from the camp or from the Reno engagement arrived, and before long the area teemed with warriors. Yates’s two companies retreated back up the bluffs to join Custer and the rest of the command on the hills above. In the next few hours the ridges, ravines, and hills above the bluffs lining the Greasy Grass swarmed with warriors harassing Custer’s 225 men from all directions.

As the 7th Cavalry moved northward along the hills, it became split up, and groups of one or two companies formed defensive positions. Generally the Indians fired at these positions from cover at a distance. Their intense rifle fire often forced the troopers to dismount. As the Hunkpapa leader Gall said, “They fought on foot. One man held the horses while the others shot the guns. We tried to shoot the holders and then by waving blankets and shooting we scared the horses....” As a result, many soldiers lost their horses and their group cohesion began to crumble. Whenever a group of soldiers broke and ran, they opened themselves to the warriors’ tactics and were chased down and killed. In tribal warfare, warriors usually did not make suicidal charges against opponents who were firing from stationary positions. But on the heights above the Sioux village this happened several times, breaking apart the troopers’ defensive positions.

A number of Indian informants spoke of the most famous charge: Crazy Horse and the Miniconjou White Bull openly challenged each other to charge

19. Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 174–81; Marquis, ed., *Wooden Leg*, 199–200; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 141–42.



the soldiers. Apparently they charged together. Miraculously they made it despite heavy fire from the soldiers. Immediately afterward the rest of the Indians charged, helping to break up the soldiers' position on Calhoun Hill. This caused confusion among the soldiers. At first groups moved off in different directions. Then most of them began retreating northward along Battle Ridge. Of course this fit well into the Indians' way of war. They chased the white men on horseback, counting coup and killing them and collecting their weapons. To the Oglala woman, Julia Face, it was a little like a buffalo hunt: "The Indians acted just like they were driving buffalo to a good place where they could be slaughtered." The remaining soldiers retreated farther along the ridge only to be wiped out later on Last Stand Hill.

Many other accounts described the Indian tactics as well as many warlike deeds of honor in the chaotic battle. In his reminiscences White Bull described how he killed several soldiers, counted coup an amazing seven times, and took guns and ammunition from the soldiers, as well as two pair of army pants for his uncle, Sitting Bull. The Miniconjou chief, Red Horse, emphasized the Indian use of captured soldiers' own guns and ammunition against them. He spoke of the importance of the warriors charging and panicking the soldiers so they broke up into groups and were thus less effective. Flying By, another Miniconjou, also noted the soldiers panicking, shooting wild, and splitting up as reasons for their defeat. Northern Cheyenne Little Hawk reminisced about brave deeds like those of Comes in Sight, whose sister had rescued him at the recent fight on the Rosebud, exposing himself to fire by riding back and forth in front of the line of soldiers. He also admired the charges by Contrary Belly and Yellow Nose. The latter, born a Ute but captured and adopted by the Cheyennes, told of dashing through the troops on Calhoun Hill.

The Indian style of fighting had won the day. Casualties had been high—probably some thirty or forty dead—though the exact figure is unknown. But many people were involved, and the men were highly motivated. It was a great victory as revenge against the white soldiers, killing over 260 of them. But in particular it was a great victory because many men had counted coup, taken enemy weapons, and accomplished other feats of warlike honor.<sup>20</sup>

The huge camp moved out on June 26. On June 27, a party of Gibbon's troops under Lieutenant James Bradley discovered the battleground. The dead bodies had been stripped and looted. Those of Reno's men close to the camp were thoroughly mutilated; those of Custer's force not so much. The Lakotas and their allies had gained an overwhelming victory using their traditional style of warfare. They were able to accomplish this by greatly outnumbering the enemy in each of the separate encounters, as Custer divided his forces. Added to these factors were

20. Michno, *Lakota Noon*, 125–42, 203–13, 215–31; Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 178, 287; Uteley, *Lance*, 155–58; Greene, *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 37, 59–64; Richard G. Hardorff, *Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 31, 45–50, 101–4, 153–57; Thomas Powers, *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 319–23.

others: the camp's inhabitants did not panic and run; the warriors fought with tenacity and a thirst for vengeance; and the soldiers continually panicked instead of trying to prepare stable, fortified positions. The soldiers' defeat was something of an anomaly. With more troops but, more important, with disciplined leadership and by establishing fortified positions, perhaps the army could have fought off the Indians, as in the many other instances of lopsided battles.

Great as this victory was for the plains warriors, it did not go far in defeating the white man. Within a few months the army hunted down the hostiles in their winter villages and forced them to retire permanently to their reservations. Sitting Bull and his followers fled to Canada, but they also were finally resigned to their fate and surrendered in 1881. The hostiles had used their methods of war to fight the white invaders and, indeed, had simultaneously continued their traditional wars with other tribes. These methods failed. But intertribal warfare continued unabated for more than a decade. While the hostiles were, in the main, contained on reservations, old tribal enemies continued to raid each other between their own reservations. These tribes, like the Crows, Gros Ventres, Assiniboins, Blackfeet, and others, who had stayed at peace with the whites in recent years and often joined the army as scouts, continued to enjoy the last few years of this warlike competition until the United States Army and government policy eventually were able to end it.<sup>21</sup>

In the end it was inevitable that the plains tribes would fail in their efforts to defeat the encroaching Americans. The plains were vast, but were rapidly filling up with ranches, farms, and towns with the help of emigrant trails and particularly the railroads. Buffalo herds, on which the tribes depended for their livelihood, were rapidly declining after years of being hunted and, more recently, being depleted by the hide hunters of the 1870s and 1880s. In addition, however, the Indians' way of war, which perhaps could have helped them to stave off defeat for a while, proved completely inadequate when opposed to the concepts of modern warfare and advanced technology.

War was the focus of life for a man. Only through raiding could he gain wealth in horses, prestige, respect, and, in fact, the regard of women, his relatives, and the tribe. But, other than the need to work together to defend one's village against attack, men went to war and fought as individuals. No man had the right to give orders to any other man; others followed him because they chose to. Thus there was very little in the way of tactics to defeat an enemy. No organized military formations or chain of command existed. Men went into battle when they chose to and to prove their bravery. High casualties were seldom acceptable in a band of several hundred people, but everyone did participate in demonstrating individual bravery and seeking glory. Women sang songs of encouragement and celebrated men's deeds. Women and children participated in mutilating the dead when possible. Native people saw others from any other tribe as fair game, because

21. Anthony McGinnis, "Intertribal Raiding on the Northern Plains after the Surrender of Sitting Bull," *Red River Valley Historical Review* (Fall 1975): 349–62; McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 173–93.

they looked down upon those “foreigners” as inferior to “the people” as tribes usually referred to themselves. Therefore any act of brutality against an enemy was acceptable. At the same time this opinion could be reversed and that enemy could become part of the “people” simply by a form of adoption.

Against a modern technologically advanced nation with unlimited population and resources at its disposal, this individualistic style of tribal war could not prevail. Modern national armies fought for specific goals that were achieved by military victories. The U.S. Army could be defeated but it would come back and fight again. Large victories, like those against Fetterman and Custer were not typical of tribal war, but they did occur, given the right situation. In 1832, a large Crow war party ambushed a band of Piegans, one of the Blackfoot tribes, along the Musselshell River in central Montana and killed almost all the men and took the women and children captive, many of whom were adopted. Thirty-four years later a band of Piegans ambushed a band of River Crows and Gros Ventres near the Cypress Hills in southeast Alberta, Canada, and apparently killed several hundred of them. In 1873, Oglalas and Brulés, coming from their Dakota reservations, trapped a band of Pawnees out hunting in extreme southwestern Nebraska. They killed over sixty men, women, and children who had sought protection in a small ravine.<sup>22</sup> Victories like these were not very common, due to the possibility of high casualties. In order to oppose the U.S. Army for any extended period of time, many of these kinds of battles would have been necessary. This was not possible in the intertribal style of war, nor was it desirable.

The plains Indian model of combat evolved over more than a century and was an extension of the indigenous culture: within its confines warriors could achieve individual honor and standing without jeopardizing the survival of the band through excessive casualties. The model of “western” modern war was completely different: it included a centralized chain of command and, with ultimate victory as its goal, was not limited by casualties as were the plains fighters. This fact was not lost upon the most prescient of the tribal leaders like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, but in the end the bounds of culture prevailed and men of the plains could not loose themselves from the constraints of their culture and its time-honored formula for glory. In the end, individual courage and fighting ability were not enough. The attitudes and tactics of intertribal warfare could not stand up to a modern army.

22. McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 49, 106, 125–26.

Copyright of Journal of Military History is the property of Society for Military History and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

