



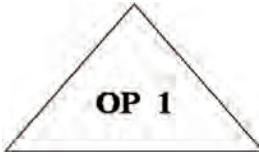
# Understanding the “Victory Disease,” From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond

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Major Timothy Karcher, US Army



Combat Studies Institute Press  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas



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## Foreword

“Turning Victory Into Success: Military Operations After the Campaign” was the title of a recent US Army Training and Doctrine Command/Combat Studies Institute military symposium at Fort Leavenworth. The presenters looked at the imperative of linking battlefield success to political objectives across both tactical and strategic spectrums. One of the symposium’s salient points was that overwhelming military accomplishment does not automatically translate to overall success.

Major Tim Karcher’s *Understanding the “Victory Disease,” From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond* presents further evidence supporting the above premise. With Operations ENDURING and IRAQI FREEDOM in the foreground today, it is fitting that this study should focus on military operations undertaken in the immediate aftermath of extraordinary military victory. US military planners must possess a solid foundation of military history and cultural awareness to ensure battlefield and strategic success today and in the future. Future conflicts are not likely to resemble those of the past, whether they are conflicts from dim memory, the previous decade, or last year. Each brings its own challenges and dynamics. One thing is certain, however, as Major Karcher points out: The US military cannot rest on the laurels of previous campaigns. Major Karcher’s study makes an important contribution to military history as a warfighter’s tool to refine critical thinking and adaptability.

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## Preface

As a result of America's national strength and its demonstrated military prowess, US forces are quite susceptible to falling prey to the effects of the "victory disease." The disease, by definition, brings defeat to a previously victorious nation or military due to three basic symptoms: arrogance, complacency, and the habit of using established patterns to solve military problems.

The growth of the victory disease can best be analyzed through the study of historical examples where the symptoms become quite clear. This work uses the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn and the 1993 actions of Task Force *Ranger* in Mogadishu, Somalia to highlight the disease's effects.

Studying the victory disease can help one avoid succumbing to its effects and ultimately find an effective vaccination. As this work will argue, the only real vaccine for the disease is found in increased study of military history in the Officer Education System, particularly through focusing on campaigns and battles where defeat may be attributed to the sickness. Simple awareness of the problem prevents one from falling prey to the disease, thereby creating immunity.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Today the United States is the sole global “superpower.” Until recently, the United States and the Soviet Union had balanced one another as the two opposing superpowers of the world, one leading the Western democracies and the other the communist Eastern Block. This balance of power in a bipolar world actually brought a tenuous peace for over 40 years. Eventually, though, the United States gained distinction as the only superpower due to the Soviet state’s collapse in the late 20th century. America’s prominence has come with great responsibility. Even though our Cold War victory and America’s rise as *the* superpower have given many Americans much comfort, as this study will illustrate, our success should also be viewed as a potential source of concern.

Accompanying its status as *the* sole superpower, the United States has a fine tradition of military proficiency and an historical string of victories that many nations view with envy. The US military has been victorious in nearly every major war it has fought, suffering its only real defeat during the protracted war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Even there, however, the US military accumulated victories at the tactical level of war but failed to achieve ambiguous strategic aims and objectives, ultimately resulting in a final strategic defeat. Since Vietnam, the US military has achieved a string of quick, decisive victories in the Caribbean, Afghanistan, and the Middle East.

Unfortunately, America’s position as *the* global superpower and her tradition of military might generate a mind-set that makes her highly susceptible to defeat on future battlefields. This mind-set is sometimes referred to as the “victory disease” and is an all too frequent byproduct of national strength. Military analysts James Dunnigan and Raymond Macedonia highlight the concept in their work, *Getting It Right: American Military Reforms After Vietnam to the Gulf War and Beyond*. According to Dunnigan and Macedonia, the victory disease threatens any nation with a history of military prowess and manifests itself in three basic symptoms: arrogance, a sense of complacency, and the habit of using established patterns to fight future conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

As these symptoms compound, they can potentially result in the unanticipated defeat of a previously victorious nation. However, it is important to note that the disease will not always lead to battlefield defeat; it may simply increase the likelihood of failure, or perceived failure, for a force afflicted by the malady. Since it appears conditions exist for the United States to fall prey, an important question must be asked: “Can the US Army avoid contracting the victory disease and thereby decrease the

likelihood of military disasters in future operations?”

## **The Victory Disease**

Analyzing what makes the United States highly susceptible to defeat will allow us to truly understand this malady. Arrogance, the primary symptom of the victory disease, shows up in the military mind-set in several ways. First, the military force suffering from arrogance views itself as nearly invincible, which comes from a high level of demonstrated military prowess and allows military leaders and planners to believe their forces can defeat any foe. This sense of invincibility also seeps into the national psyche and causes national leaders and ordinary citizens to expect overwhelming military victories in any future conflict. Underestimating one's potential enemies comes with arrogance since the overconfident party views his own forces as unbeatable and the opponent as hardly worth consideration. Arrogance quickly leads to a sense of complacency.

Complacency on the part of political and military leaders and planners is a further symptom of the disease. Since they view the army as invincible and the enemy as little competition, military leaders and planners become complacent when planning and executing campaigns. Analyzing the enemy seems unnecessary, which results in a limited understanding of the enemy's capabilities and potential courses of action. Supreme arrogance, coupled with complacency, often causes leaders and planners to use conventional, uninformed patterns.

The US Army's educational system continually points out that there are no "school solutions" or "cookie-cutter solutions" to military problems because each new problem must be viewed within its own particular context. Unfortunately, this view does not always carry over to real-world events. Often, the victory disease leads the military leader and planner to seek these cookie-cutter solutions through the use of established patterns. A military leader or planner afflicted with this symptom sees the decisive impact of past solutions and believes that if these techniques are used in future conflicts they will yield similar results. Since an afflicted army views its forces as vastly superior to the enemy, military leaders and planners adopt an attitude of: "Why change what has worked in the past?" The greatest danger when using established patterns lies in the enemy's reaction. Setting a pattern is fine as long as the enemy follows with his own patterns and reacts in a predictable fashion. A considerable danger occurs, though, when the enemy deviates from his normal reaction, placing the friendly force at a significant disadvantage and causing the supposed recipe for success to turn into a recipe for failure.

These symptoms compound and eventually develop into a full-blown, possibly fatal case of the victory disease. The danger of the illness is that it

allows one's enemies to easily template their responses to a given stimulus. Since afflicted military leaders and planners are likely to use conventional patterns, the enemy can predict their actions and seize the initiative. Maintaining the initiative in all military operations instead of reacting to the enemy's actions is a basic principle of war espoused by the US Army in Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (June 2001). The victory disease can easily and gradually creep into the mind-set of military leaders and planners and ultimately take hold of a campaign plan.

Two extreme cases are highlighted in the following chapters to clearly explain and detail these symptoms. Seldom are these symptoms as obvious as they may seem from this brief explanation however. Hindsight also enhances the obviousness of these symptoms; one must avoid the urge to judge past national and military leaders since clarity often comes through the prism of historical analysis. This study attempts to describe this insidious threat to battlefield success and recommend ways to vaccinate military leaders and planners and, hopefully, prevent them from falling prey to the disease. Two very different examples will be used to illustrate the symptoms at work, their end results, and their persistence through history. The Little Bighorn will be examined as an example of tactical failure that, in turn, galvanized the nation to pursue an eventual strategic victory. The second example, Task Force *Ranger* (TF *Ranger*) in Somalia, will illustrate the victory disease operating in a strategic failure.

### *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*

Chapter 2 focuses on a key historical example of the victory disease—the Battle of the Little Bighorn when, on 25 June 1876, on a ridge-line overlooking the Little Bighorn River, Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer and five companies of the 7th US Cavalry were killed by hostile Sioux and Cheyenne Indians.<sup>2</sup> The famous Battle of the Little Bighorn, or “Custer’s Last Stand,” clearly illustrates a direct cause and effect relationship between the symptoms of the victory disease and the outcome of a tactical battle.

In this example, one clearly sees all the victory disease symptoms involved. A nation reunited after a bloody civil war expanded along the western frontier and came into violent contact with the indigenous population, the Plains Indians. The US Army, arrogant from its victory over the Confederacy, viewed the Indians with contempt and underestimated their capacity to wage war. Over the years, as the US Army gained experience fighting the Indians, patterns emerged establishing how one should go about defeating them. These three symptoms combined to produce a shocking and unprecedented tactical defeat of American arms.

In this case, the tactical defeat so shocked the nation on the eve of its centennial celebration that the populace demanded victory over the hostile Plains Indians. Therefore, in the case of the Little Bighorn the victory disease created a tactical defeat that ultimately yielded victory at the national-strategic level of war.

### *Task Force Ranger in Mogadishu, Somalia*

Chapter 3 examines a second, more recent example of the victory disease at work. It focuses on the actions of TF *Ranger* in Mogadishu, Somalia on 3 and 4 October 1993. In this example, the disease's effects are most evident at strategic and operational levels of war, though the symptoms still remain evident at the tactical level, just to a lesser degree. The battle yielded a tactical victory, albeit at some cost, but resulted in a strategic defeat.

The United States, so recently dominant in the Persian Gulf War, again encountered a tribal culture, this time on the African continent. Based on the almost bloodless victory over Saddam Hussein in 1991, senior policy makers believed American military and technological prowess would easily prevail over Somali factions and clans. At the tactical level, elite forces, by their very nature extremely self-confident, found themselves pitted against a third-world adversary. During the operation, TF *Ranger* used the same techniques that had been used on six previous missions. In this case, however, the established patterns of battle proved ineffective; the three victory disease symptoms reared their ugly heads and resulted in a national strategic defeat.

Although this action was a tactical success (a company-sized element—approximately 100 elite US soldiers—held off an enemy force of over 1,000 Somali clansmen and was ultimately extracted by a US-led multinational relief force), the resulting loss of 18 US soldiers shocked strategic policy makers. At the highest levels of the US government, policy makers could not reconcile these significant casualties with their ambiguous strategic aims and objectives and eventually withdrew all forces from the region. The TF *Ranger* example highlights the effects of the victory disease at all levels of war, but particularly at the strategic and operational levels.

### *The Road Ahead*

Once the disease and its symptoms are clearly understood, the next step is to seek a vaccine. Chapters 4 and 5 further analyze the symptoms and attempt to find ways to prevent the military leader and planner from being afflicted. Potential vaccinations for the syndrome come from a variety of sources. The Officer Education System (OES) is one, where the

increased study of military history highlighting past examples of US victory disease in action could help immunize the Army. Knowledge of the disease will likely produce increased vigilance by military leaders and planners, making them less likely to succumb to its effects. The Army's planning doctrine is another source of possible vaccination. Many of the disease's symptoms are rooted in assumptions generated during the planning process. Thus, a great need exists to challenge one's assumptions during the planning stages to ensure that the disease does not creep into the plan.

### **The Significance of This Study**

This work desires to prevent the US Army from falling prey to the victory disease in future conflicts. Since the result of infection is defeat, vaccinating military leaders and planners is essential. Every potential conflict must be analyzed within its own specific context. The nation must not see future conflicts as a "Desert Storm Equivalent" where US forces will easily, and almost bloodlessly, achieve victory over any foe.<sup>3</sup> To have this mind-set only invites disaster.

## Notes

1. James Dunnigan and Raymond Macedonia, *Getting It Right: American Military Reforms After Vietnam to the Gulf War and Beyond* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993), 21.
2. During the Civil War Custer was brevetted to Major General, USV, on 15 April 1865. After the war he reverted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.
3. *Ibid.*, 30.

## Chapter 2

### The Battle of the Little Bighorn

Few finer historical examples of the victory disease exist than the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Prior to determining the disease's effect on this operation, one must understand how the overall campaign and the ensuing battle came to pass. This chapter will further explore how the malady contributed to the failure of Custer's 7th Cavalry.

#### The Clash of Cultures

For much of its existence, early American society had been moving westward. Particularly after 1800, this migration moved farther west and north, making contact with the northern Plains Indians more frequent and often more violent. Initially, white settlers passed through the Great Plains en route to the gold fields of California or western Montana, but serious westward expansion began again in earnest with the end of the Civil War. Roads through Indian territory and the construction of transcontinental railroads created tension between these two societies, causing more frequent military contact with hostile Indians. The inevitable clash between new settlers and the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne tribes came to a head toward the end of the 19th century.

Due in large part to Custer's 1874 expedition inside the Black Hills and the resulting discovery of gold, a steady stream of miners and prospectors started entering this area. This encroachment on the Black Hills, a sacred area known to the Sioux as the *Pa Sapa*, helped force the two societies into violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> Encroachment on sacred Sioux territory directly violated the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty made between the United States and the Sioux Nation granting the Sioux almost all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River. This treaty further granted the Sioux "unceded Indian territory" east of the Bighorn Mountains and north of the North Platte River that, in essence, was also off-limits to settlers and travelers.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, the US Army enforced the Fort Laramie Treaty and kept miners and prospectors out of the Sioux's Black Hills area. President Ulysses S. Grant eventually yielded to political pressure, though, and took steps toward opening the Black Hills to miners. His hope of gaining legal access to the Black Hills by renegotiating the treaty with the Sioux was impeded by the "nontreaty Sioux."<sup>3</sup> They were also frequently referred to as "roamers" because of their disdain for static reservation life.<sup>4</sup>

Having failed to renegotiate the treaty, in November of 1875 President Grant instructed his military commanders not to enforce the standing

orders forbidding miners and prospectors from entering the region.<sup>5</sup> President Grant further ordered all Sioux and Northern Cheyenne roamers to return to their reservations by 31 January 1876 or be deemed “hostile” and turned over to the War Department if necessary.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the harsh winter climate of the northern plains made it virtually impossible for the roamers to obey this presidential edict has been lost on many historians. Nevertheless, on 4 February 1876, when the deadline passed, Lieutenant General Phillip Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, ordered a campaign that would ultimately lead Custer and the 7th Cavalry to confront a huge assembly of Sioux and Northern Cheyenne on the banks of the Little Bighorn River almost five months later.

## **The Centennial Campaign**

Sheridan’s plan called for immediate action against the hostiles as military leaders on the frontier viewed winter campaigns the best way to bring the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne to battle. Experience had shown that summer campaigns only produced endless marches in search of the elusive foe; yet, during the winter months the Indians were more easily surprised in their often snow-bound villages.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, destroying or capturing a village during the winter could essentially defeat the Indians. A winter campaign had the additional advantage of facing fewer opponents, since many roamers preferred to winter on the reservation. Thus, the winter roamers were believed to be composed of only 800 warriors spread across a variety of smaller villages since feeding a large village was difficult during the winter.

Sheridan ordered Generals George Crook and Alfred Terry, commanders of the Department of the Platte and the Department of the Dakota respectively, to attack the hostile bands thought to be located along the Yellowstone River in the Montana Territory.<sup>8</sup> General Terry further ordered Colonel John Gibbon, commander of the District of Montana, to participate in this campaign.<sup>9</sup> As envisioned, Sheridan’s plan would consist of three converging columns with Terry advancing westward from Fort Abraham Lincoln, near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota; Gibbon moving in from the west advancing from Fort Shaw, north of present-day Helena, Montana; and Crook attacking north from Fort Fetterman, located along the North Platte River, near present-day Douglas, Wyoming. Within this campaign, Sheridan did not envision mutual support between columns, but he seems to have believed that the attack’s converging nature would more successfully locate the village, defeat the hostiles, and force them onto the reservations. It should be noted that all the military commanders were convinced these columns could defeat the hostiles without support from another force.



## *The Winter Campaign*

Sheridan's winter campaign did not come to pass because his subordinates could not quickly prepare for and execute one on the frozen northern plains. Only General Crook was able to mount a winter expedition, launching a mixed force of cavalry and infantry numbering almost 900 soldiers on 28 February 1876.<sup>10</sup> This force surprised a small village of Sioux and Northern Cheyenne along the Powder River on 17 March 1876. Although the village, made up of approximately 100 lodges, was destroyed and the Indian pony herd captured, Indian casualties were light. The warriors subsequently recaptured the majority of the pony herd, and nearby hostiles took in their beleaguered kinsmen, providing respite from the harsh winter climate.<sup>11</sup> All the while, General Terry and Colonel Gibbon were unable to mount winter expeditions. Crook's attack on the Powder River village only served notice to the hostiles that the US Army was preparing to make good on Grant's ultimatum.<sup>12</sup>

## *The Spring-Summer Campaign*

Sheridan now hoped to catch the hostiles in an early spring campaign before the summer roamers left the reservations and reinforced them. The military commanders still estimated that the Indian village would consist of less than 1,000 warriors, even though information to the contrary existed as early as May 1876.<sup>13</sup> During April and May 1876 the planned columns took the field. Terry and Gibbon communicated and cooperated from the east and west, respectively, with Terry serving as the overall commander of the Montana and Dakota Columns. These columns eventually linked up on the Yellowstone River on 9 June 1876. Terry and Gibbon worked in concert while Crook's column, advancing from the south, had virtually no communication with the other two forces. Even though Gibbon's column had located the sought-after Indian encampment by the middle of May, he mysteriously failed to report this information to Terry and failed to bring the enemy to battle.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the various columns spent the months of April and May searching for the hostile village, moving inexorably closer to a confrontation in present-day southern Montana that would culminate in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Crook again made the first significant contact with the enemy, this time on the banks of Rosebud Creek on 17 June 1876.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for Crook, the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne had identified his 1,300-man Wyoming Column and sent a war party, consisting of approximately 1,000 warriors, south to counter his continued northern movement. After a daylong battle, the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne checked Crook's advance, causing him to backtrack south to his base camp on Goose Creek, near present-day Sheridan, Wyoming. Crook would not take to the field

again until after the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Although this engagement was not extremely consequential, Crook failed significantly by not informing Terry and Gibbon of his battle, the aggressiveness of the Indians, or of the large force of warriors encountered.<sup>16</sup> Since the anticipated enemy situation had changed, Crook might well have alerted his fellow commanders, even though Sheridan's plan did not require communication between the separate columns. Most commanders expected the Indians to avoid contact with the converging columns and only muster 800 warriors, at most. In the case of the Battle of the Rosebud, Crook encountered over 1,000 warriors more than 25 miles from the main village. Conditions were not as expected, yet Crook only chose to inform his superior commander and not his fellow commanders of a change in the enemy situation, thereby contributing to the subsequent disaster at the Little Bighorn.

### *The Road to the Little Bighorn*

While Crook was moving from the south, the combined Dakota and Montana Columns, under the overall command of General Terry, were attempting to locate the Indian encampment. On 10 June 1876, Terry dispatched Major Marcus Reno, Custer's second in command, with six companies of the 7th Cavalry on a reconnaissance mission to the south to scout along the Powder and Tongue Rivers and west to Rosebud Creek.<sup>17</sup> On 19 June 1876, Reno returned from his scouting mission with information about the Indian encampment. He had followed the trail of abandoned village sites as the Indian encampment moved southwest from the Tongue River toward Rosebud Creek. Reno's reconnaissance determined that the enemy village was not on the Rosebud, as suspected by Terry, but instead had continued to move west and was likely along the Little Bighorn River.

Reno also estimated that the village consisted of approximately 400 lodges.<sup>18</sup> Using the standard frontier calculation of two warriors per lodge, the village was believed to contain approximately 800 warriors—what the expedition's leaders expected. However, the most recently occupied village site that Reno had identified was almost three weeks old, having been occupied in early June. Unbeknownst to the military commanders, the summer roamers had started arriving in large numbers throughout the early part of June, nearly tripling the number of warriors the Indians could field.

On the afternoon of 21 July 1876, General Terry held a planning conference with his senior commanders aboard the column's supply boat,

the *Far West*.<sup>19</sup> Present at this conference were General Terry, Colonel Gibbon, Lieutenant Colonel Custer, and Major Brisbin, commander of Gibbon's cavalry. During this meeting, Terry laid out his vision for the upcoming battle and gave orders to his subordinates. Custer, with the 7th Cavalry, was to move south up Rosebud Creek, cut west to the headwaters of the Little Bighorn River, and then move north down the river to strike the village from the south.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Gibbon's column, with Terry, would move west along the Yellowstone River to its intersection with the Bighorn River. Gibbon would then move south up the Bighorn River to the mouth of the Little Bighorn. Based on time-distance calculations, Terry expected Gibbon's column to be at the mouth of the Little Bighorn on 26 June 1876. It is unclear from the historical record whether Gibbon's unit was to attack the village from the north or simply to establish a blocking position to intercept Indians fleeing from Custer's attack from the south.<sup>21</sup>

Many accused Custer, almost immediately after the last shots of the battle were fired, of disobeying Terry's orders by deviating from the "ordered" route and attacking without the support of Gibbon's column. Yet, though Custer received written orders from Terry prior to his departure on the morning of 22 June 1876, they gave Custer great discretionary leeway. Furthermore, the orders make only vague references to concerted action between Custer and Gibbon, stating that through their movements the Indian village "may be so nearly inclosed [*sic*] by the two columns that their escape will be impossible."<sup>22</sup> Whether Custer did or did not disobey orders exceeds the scope of this study; what is important to note here is that none of the participants seem to have felt either column (the Terry-Gibbon or the Custer column) faced a grave risk if it encountered the Indian village alone.<sup>23</sup>

Once the 7th Cavalry began its movement south, following the trace of Rosebud Creek, Custer seems to have focused on locating the Indian village and striking it before it could disperse. Most military leaders on this expedition seemed to fear the dispersion of an Indian village before attack since this was the Indians most common defense.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Custer moved up Rosebud Creek following the trail of the Indian village previously reported by Major Reno.

On the evening of 24 June 1876, Custer made his last camp along Rosebud Creek in the vicinity of present-day Busby, Montana. Here, he decided to deviate from his orders and follow the trail of the Indian village west over the divide separating the Rosebud and Little Bighorn valleys. The abandoned village sites seemed to increase in size as Custer's force began to close in on the village.<sup>25</sup> Custer informed his officers he had decided to make a night march up to the divide between the Rosebud and

Little Bighorn valleys. He would conceal the command east of the divide, allowing the men and horses to rest the following day while the scouts reconnoitered to determine the exact disposition of the Indian village thought to be on the banks of the Little Bighorn River.<sup>26</sup> Custer then planned to attack the village from the south on the morning of 26 June 1876, hoping for a repeat of his successful attack on the Cheyenne village of Black Kettle in November 1868.<sup>27</sup> This planned attack would have fulfilled General Terry's vision of Custer's attack from the south, likely driving the fleeing Indians north toward Gibbon's command still moving south up the Bighorn River, toward the mouth of the river. Unfortunately for Custer and his command, and as is often the case in war, enemy actions played a role in the battle's outcome.

### *The Battle Begins*

In the early morning hours of 25 June 1876, Custer's chief of scouts, Lieutenant Charles Varnum, and a small scouting party of Crow and Arikara Indian scouts climbed a hilltop lookout subsequently known as the Crow's Nest.<sup>28</sup> From this perch, the Indian scouts identified signs of the Indian village on the banks of the Little Bighorn River.<sup>29</sup> Again controversy arises since accounts vary about whether Custer's Indian scouts actually saw the village or simply identified indicators of a village (a pony herd, or smoke from cooking fires). Regardless of what the scouts actually saw, Varnum relayed the news of the sighting by courier to Custer who immediately came forward to view the village firsthand. By the time Custer arrived on the Crow's Nest, likely around 0900, morning haze combined with smoke from cooking fires obscured the village approximately 15 miles to the west.<sup>30</sup>

With the general location of the village identified, it appeared as though Custer's plan of attack was on track. Custer though, began to receive information leading him to believe the Indians knew the location of his force.<sup>31</sup> Past encounters with the Indians had shown that once they identified a threat to their village the village would disperse, leaving the Army no other option but to begin the search anew.

At this point Custer made another fateful decision. He called his officers together and informed them the command had been detected and they must move west and attack the village immediately to keep the Indians from escaping. He ordered his subordinates to inspect their commands and prepare to move west.

At approximately noon on Sunday, 25 June 1876, the 7th Cavalry crossed the divide and started the opening stages of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.<sup>32</sup> Just west of the divide, Custer halted the command and gave

orders for the upcoming battle's troop dispositions. Since Custer did not know the exact location and disposition of the enemy, he assembled his forces in a dispersed formation that would allow him to identify the enemy force and then maneuver his element against the village. This formation would also allow the 7th Cavalry to strike the village from more than one direction simultaneously, another commonly believed recipe for success when attacking an Indian encampment.

Custer ordered Captain Benteen to take a battalion, consisting of Companies D, H, and K (approximately 125 men), to scout to the left (south) to observe the upper reaches of the Little Bighorn valley.<sup>33</sup> This move was in line with Terry's orders instructing Custer to move "feeling constantly to your left so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southeast by passing around your left flank."<sup>34</sup> This deployment also served to secure Custer's southern flank, preventing any outlying Indian villages farther up the Little Bighorn from surprising Custer's main body from the south, as had nearly happened during the Battle of the Washita almost eight years before.<sup>35</sup>

Upon Benteen's departure, Custer ordered Major Reno, his second in command, to form a battalion consisting of Companies A, G, and M (approximately 140 men once augmented by an element of Varnum's scouts).<sup>36</sup> Custer would retain command of the third and largest battalion consisting of Companies C, E, F, I, and L (approximately 225 men).<sup>37</sup> These dispositions left Company B along with a detail under the command of Lieutenant Edward Mathey to follow and secure the regiment's mule pack trains (the entire force consisted of approximately 110 men).<sup>38</sup> Once the commanders had organized their ad hoc battalions, Custer ordered the main body, consisting of his battalion and Reno's command, to move west toward a distant creek (then known as Ash Creek, but subsequently named Reno Creek). Company B and the regimental supply trains were to follow approximately 20 minutes behind the main body. As the mule train was slow and difficult to move, Custer must have known that this 20-minute separation would increase over the necessary 15-mile movement to the Little Bighorn valley. Thus, with his forces divided and limited orders given to his subordinates, Custer moved toward the Indian village.

While traveling along the north side of Ash Creek, Custer ordered Reno's command to move along the creek's south side. During the march down Ash Creek, Custer and Reno encountered a single "lone tepee" used as a burial lodge for a Sioux warrior likely mortally wounded during the Battle of the Rosebud over a week before.<sup>39</sup> As the main body continued down Ash Creek, Custer's mistaken belief that the Indians were attempting to break camp and run away was continually reinforced.<sup>40</sup> Indicators, such

as reports of small warrior parties withdrawing as the cavalry moved west and the huge dust cloud seen growing over the bluffs screening the Little Bighorn valley, helped convince Custer swift attack was essential to prevent the elusive foe from escaping.

Shortly after passing the lone tepee, Custer ordered Reno to continue west, cross the Little Bighorn River, and charge the southern end of the Indian village. Again, controversy arises here, as many accuse Custer of abandoning Reno since his orders, relayed by the Regimental Adjutant Lieutenant W. W. Cooke, stated “that Reno would be ‘supported by the whole outfit.’”<sup>41</sup> Reno followed his commander’s orders, expecting the entire regiment to reinforce his small battalion by adding the needed weight to his charge. Instead of following Reno’s advance, however, Custer maneuvered his larger battalion along the eastern bank of the Little Bighorn, concealing his movement by traveling along the bluffs east of the river.

As Reno’s battalion charged down the valley, it encountered a large force of mounted warriors on the south side of the village. These warriors were riding their horses back and forth, stirring up dust to conceal the village and enabling their ponies to get their second wind. Upon realizing the Indians were moving south to meet his force, Reno ordered his battalion to halt and fight on foot.<sup>42</sup> This established a dismounted skirmish line in the valley with the easternmost company’s flank (Company G) generally anchored on the timber growing along the west side of the Little Bighorn River. Initially, Reno’s force advanced toward the village on foot, firing at the Indian warriors attacking from the southern end of the village. This growing force of Indian warriors began maneuvering to turn Reno’s left flank into the valley floor.<sup>43</sup>

The Indian flanking maneuver appears to have been aimed at stampeding Reno’s held horses that were initially deployed to the rear of the skirmish line in accordance with the standard tactics of the day.<sup>44</sup> As a result of this threat to the held horses, the mounts moved to the east inside the protection of the timber growing alongside the river. Meanwhile, the Indian force gathering against Reno’s battalion grew in number as more warriors rallied to defend the southern end of the camp, resulting in as many as 900 warriors against Reno’s 140 troopers. It was not long before Reno’s entire command withdrew to the cover of the timber, likely only holding its position on the valley floor for approximately 15 minutes.<sup>45</sup>

While Reno’s command drew the warriors south, Custer moved his larger battalion along the bluffs east of the Little Bighorn River with the likely mission of striking the northern end of the village. As previously stated, the standard practice was to hit a village in numerous locations, throwing the warriors off balance and precipitating a rout of Indian forces.

Also, from the bluffs east of the river Custer observed the Indian village and likely saw that most of the noncombatants were fleeing north and that the northern end of the village was largely unprotected.<sup>46</sup>

While Custer continued his movement north, Reno's beleaguered command was virtually surrounded in the timber. The situation there became increasingly untenable, so Reno decided to withdraw his command from the valley floor and seek safety in the high ground east of the Little Bighorn River. Reno ordered the withdrawal of his forces, a maneuver that he subsequently referred to as a charge. Unfortunately, this retreat or charge was poorly planned, inadequately commanded, and executed by terrified troops. Reno's action in the valley left 40 dead cavalymen (almost one-third of Reno's force) lying along the banks of the Little Bighorn River.<sup>47</sup>

This retreat from the valley allowed the Indians concentrated on the southern side of the village to ride north against a newly identified threat: the battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Custer. Along his route of march, Custer sent two messages back to the pack trains and Benteen's command to quickly move up and reinforce him.<sup>48</sup> These messages would be sent in vain, though, since the Indians concentrated around Custer's command more quickly than his own forces could come to his aid. Once again controversy arises; many advocates of Custer cast aspersions on his subordinates for failing their commander in his hour of greatest need. However, just as with the previously mentioned controversies, these accusations are important to note yet exceed the scope of this study.

As Custer's forces maneuvered against the northern end of the village, the Indian warriors blocked his attack in the vicinity of a river-crossing site near the intersection of Medicine Tail Coulee and the Little Bighorn River. Exactly how Custer's battalion was destroyed is a matter of speculation, since all of the white, firsthand participants of this battle were killed. Only the battle's Indian warriors remained to tell the saga of "Custer's Last Stand."

The existing Indian accounts are quite confusing for a multitude of reasons. First, the Indians do not have a common measure of time easily understood by modern researchers. Second, the Indians did not develop a chronological history of the battle but instead collected various warrior accounts that were combined to develop the oral tribal history. Finally, many historians consider the Indian accounts suspect since many stories were told after the Indians surrendered to the whites and by participants likely fearing retribution from an angry white society. All of these reasons, combined with the inherent difficulties of translating the Indian accounts from their native language to English, tend to complicate the Indian testimony

and leave a very disjointed explanation of what happened to Custer's battalion. Thus, the question of exactly how Custer's battalion ended that June day will likely remain a matter of conjecture forever.

What is certain is that the five companies of the 7th Cavalry (Companies C, E, F, I, and L) moved north to a ridge today known as Custer or Battle Ridge. On this prominence, or in the general vicinity, the remains of approximately 210 cavalymen were found on 27 June 1876.<sup>49</sup> The Sioux and Northern Cheyenne were able to mass over 1,000 warriors against Custer's command and they quickly overwhelmed the beleaguered defenders, killing every single member. From an historical perspective, the fact that it did occur remains much more important than how it occurred.

During the destruction of Custer's command, members of Reno's command attempted to aid their commander. Captain Thomas Weir led his Company D toward the "sound of the guns" and out of the defensive perimeter Reno had established on the bluffs east of the Little Bighorn River.<sup>50</sup> Eventually, another element of Reno's command followed Company D to a ridgeline approximately one mile north of the defensive position, taking position on a high promontory subsequently known as Weir Point. From this observation post, Reno's command likely witnessed the end of the tragic battle without fully understanding the significance of what it saw. Once the Indians had overwhelmed Custer's force, they quickly moved south to force Reno's command back into its defensive perimeter.

### *The Battle Ends*

For the remainder of the evening of 25 June 1876, Indian warriors surrounded Reno's defensive perimeter and placed a heavy volume of fire on the soldiers. As night fell, most of the Indians returned to the village, leaving a small force to ensure the soldiers did not withdraw. At this time, withdrawal would have been impossible as Reno had to consider the necessity of carrying out his wounded soldiers. The surviving two other 7th Cavalry companies spent a fitful night on a hilltop (Reno Hill) east of the Little Bighorn. There, they prepared defensive positions they were certain to need the following day when the Sioux and Cheyenne would undoubtedly return.

Throughout the day of 26 June 1876, Indian warriors held the remnants of the 7th Cavalry in check on Reno Hill. Several times throughout the day, small groups of soldiers left the safety of the hilltop defenses to fill canteens from the river at the base of the bluffs.<sup>51</sup> Also throughout the day the dismounted cavalymen made several charges to push back Indian encroachment on their positions. As evening approached, the Indians broke camp and moved south along the Little Bighorn valley. Warriors in the trail



of the giant procession were seen lighting the prairie grass on fire to discourage pursuit by cavalry forces.

On the morning of 27 June 1876, survivors on Reno Hill observed a US Army force moving south down the Little Bighorn valley. Relief had come at last to the survivors of the 7th Cavalry, as the column under General Terry's command arrived at the abandoned village site. Along with the arrival of Terry's forces (primarily composed of Colonel Gibbon's Montana Column) came the shocking revelation that every single man in Custer's battalion had been killed on a ridgeline approximately three miles north of their defensive site. Throughout their time on Reno Hill, the surviving members of the 7th Cavalry debated about what had happened to Custer.<sup>52</sup> Many thought he had abandoned Reno and Benteen, while others believed the Indians had pushed Custer's forces north where they likely joined with the Terry-Gibbon column. No one seemed to believe that Custer, the hero of the Civil War, a man notorious for his "Custer's Luck," could possibly have suffered such a grave defeat.

## **Conclusion**

With the end of this historic battle came a great many questions and controversies. More important, though, this defeat brought about a resurgence of national will. Custer's defeat actually became the impetus for stirring the nation to ultimate victory over the Plains tribes. Analysis of the Little Bighorn leads to one primary question: "How could this military disgrace occur?"

One must understand the victory disease and its symptoms to truly answer this question. In Chapter 4, an in-depth examination of the symptoms will illustrate how the 7th Cavalry's belief that it was invincible and that the Indians could not stand against a disciplined force of cavalry led to its defeat on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. After presenting the basics of the Centennial Campaign of 1876 and the actions of the 7th Cavalry during the Little Bighorn, this study now transitions to a more recent example of the victory disease. With the turning of a page we leap ahead over 100 years and examine a late 20th-century example of the disease at work.

## Notes

1. Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 62.

2. John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 14.

3. The “nontreaty Sioux” were those who preferred the unbounded, traditional existence over reservation living, thereby refusing to live under the rules and treaties of white society. A segment of the Northern Cheyenne tribe allied themselves with these Sioux in their similar desire to live the nomadic existence. It is not surprising that these nontreaty Indians came into violent contact with the encroaching whites who were seen as spoiling hunting grounds and disrupting their traditional lifestyles.

4. “Roamers” came in two varieties. The more committed “winter roamers” lived the traditional existence year-round. The “summer roamers” left the reservation only during the easier months and returned for the harsh winter months.

5. Stewart, 69.

6. Gray, 34.

7. Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indians 1866-1891* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 248.

8. Gray, 36.

9. *Ibid.*, 42.

10. Utley, 248.

11. Gray, 55-58.

12. *Ibid.*, 322.

13. William O. Taylor, *With Custer on the Little Bighorn* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 185. On 24 March 1876, General Terry sent a telegram to his superior, Major General Sheridan, advising him a trustworthy frontiersman reported the hostile village consisted of no less than 2,000 lodges, and the warriors were well supplied with ammunition. On 14 May 1876, Terry again sent Sheridan a telegram stating his belief that the village likely consisted of 1,500 lodges and that the Indians were likely preparing to make a stand.

14. Gray, 79-80.

15. Utley, 255.

16. Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 123-24. Crook did report to Sheridan, but this information did not reach Terry until after the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

17. *Ibid.*, 126.

18. *Ibid.*, 135.

19. John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 199-204.

20. Notations of “up” and “down” refer to the various rivers’ direction of flow and may confuse some readers not familiar with the river networks in southern Montana. The Little Bighorn River generally flows south to north, emptying into the Bighorn River just south of present-day Hardin, Montana. The Bighorn River also generally flows south to north, eventually emptying into the Yellowstone River near present-day Custer, Montana. As with the other watercourses south of the Yellowstone River, Rosebud Creek also flows south to north, emptying into the Yellowstone River near present-day Rosebud, Montana. The Yellowstone River traverses the southern portion of Montana, generally flowing west to east. It joins the Missouri River at the present Montana-North Dakota border, northeast of Sidney.

21. Gray, 143.

22. *Ibid.*, 148.

23. Edward S. Godfrey, *Custer’s Last Battle 1876* (Silverthorne, CO: Vista-books, 1976), 42.

24. Gray, 215.

25. As Custer’s force began to close in on the Indian encampment, scouts reported the abandoned village sites were growing in size. This was due to the arrival of the summer roamers who joined the hostile camp in early June. Two highly respected scouts (Mitch Boyer and the Arikara Scout Bloody Knife) warned Custer there were far too many Indians in the village for the 7th Cavalry to face, but they were largely ignored.

26. Gray, 221.

27. On 27 November 1868, Custer and the 7th Cavalry attacked the sleeping village of Black Kettle on the Washita River in Indian territory (northwest of present-day Elk City, Oklahoma). This successful attack, where Custer’s troops surrounded the sleeping village and attacked at sunrise, became the model for attacking an unsuspecting village.

28. Kenneth Hammer ed., *Custer in ’76: Walter Camp’s Notes on the Custer Fight* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 60.

29. Accounts vary widely as to the time of different occurrences. For the purposes of this discussion, the timetable for the battle is taken from John Gray’s exhaustive study of time-distance relationships found in *Custer’s Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*.

30. Gray, 235-39.

31. Gray, *Custer’s Last Campaign*, 239-241. Upon Custer’s arrival at the Crow’s Nest, Lieutenant Varnum informed him his scouts had found two Sioux scouting parties on the divide. Varnum’s Crow scouts were certain these Sioux had detected smoke from the cooking fires of the halted 7th Cavalry east of the divide. One Crow scout, White Man Runs Him, reportedly argued against the idea that the Sioux had identified the command. Upon Custer’s return to the column, Captain Tom Custer, George’s younger brother, informed him a cavalry squad had backtracked along the column’s route of march to retrieve a box of rations

dropped during the night movement. Upon cresting a ridgeline, the squad encountered two Indians opening the box with their hatchets. The squad, led by Sergeant William Curtis, fired upon the Indians, who fled in the direction of the Little Bighorn.

32. Gray, 245.

33. *Ibid.*, 259.

34. Stewart, 249.

35. During the Battle of the Washita, Custer attacked the Southern Cheyenne village of Black Kettle. Since Custer had moved his forces in after nightfall without conducting a proper reconnaissance, he was unaware that at least seven other villages were encamped in close proximity to Black Kettle's village. When they heard the attack, Indian warriors massed on the high ground overlooking the battlefield. Only through a brash demonstration of marching toward the subsequent camps did Custer extract the 7th Cavalry from this predicament.

36. William A. Graham, *The Story of the Little Bighorn: Custer's Last Fight* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 26.

37. *Ibid.*, 27.

38. *Ibid.*

39. David Humphreys Miller, *Custer's Fall: The Indian Side of the Story* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1957), 75. In most accounts of the battle, this lodge is referred to as the "lone tepee" or the "dead-warrior lodge." The lodge is believed to contain the remains of a Sans Arc Warrior named Old She-Bear.

40. Gray, 273-275.

41. W. A. Graham, *The Story of the Little Big Horn: Custer's Last Fight* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1926), 33.

42. Emory Upton, *Cavalry Tactics: United States Army, Assimilated to the Tactics of Infantry and Artillery* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 264.

43. Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 197), 56-57.

44. Upton, *Cavalry Tactics*, 253. When a Cavalry unit was ordered to fight on foot the men would count off by "fours" (the smallest unit within the organization, roughly equivalent to the modern-day squad) with the fourth man taking his three companions' horses and leading them to the rear. This allowed the three dismounted cavalrymen on the skirmish line to concentrate solely on firing their weapons.

45. Gray, 290.

46. Many scholars speculate that Custer was likely attempting to capture the Indian noncombatants to subdue the warriors. One must remember the overall objective was to force the Indians onto the reservation. If Custer could capture the

village and the noncombatants he could likely negotiate their surrender.

47. Gray, 294.

48. Stewart, 238-40.

49. Gray, 294.

50. Graham, 63-65.

51. Melbourne C. Chandler, *Of Gary Owen in Glory: The History of the Seventh United States Cavalry* (Annandale, VA: The Turnpike Press, 1960), 397. In recognition of the selfless heroism displayed by these “water carriers,” 19 soldiers were later awarded the Medal of Honor. For other acts of heroism during this battle an additional four soldiers also earned the award. This is the largest number of Medal of Honor recipients ever for a single engagement.

52. Graham, 76.



## Chapter 3

### Task Force *Ranger* in Mogadishu

It is easy to assume that although the effects of the victory disease may have contributed to the 7th Cavalry's defeat at the Little Bighorn, today's national and military leaders are incapable of falling prey to this sickness. Unfortunately, the 1993 deployment of TF *Ranger* to the war-torn African nation of Somalia refutes this assumption. In the Somali example, the symptoms were most prevalent at the strategic and operational levels of war, with some indication that leaders at the tactical level were also afflicted.

As was necessary in the previous analysis of the Little Bighorn, the reader must first understand the overall operation in Somalia and how the battle occurred in early October 1993. Armed with this understanding, further discussion of the disease's symptoms will illustrate how it contributed to failed US policy in Somalia and how today's leaders are still not immune to its grasp.

#### **Descent Into Anarchy**

The Somali Republic was created in July 1960 by a post-colonial merger of the former British and Italian Somalilands.<sup>1</sup> From its outset, this nation on the eastern coast of Africa was beset with problems. Unlike many former colonial holdings within Africa, Somali boundaries were drawn to allow for a homogenous population; even so, Somali society was divided along social and occupational lines, between urban and rural populations, and most significantly, as a result of various clans within the population.<sup>2</sup> The typical Somali viewed himself as a member of his particular clan first and then as a Somali, which obviously weakened the strength of Somali nationalism.

Early attempts by the Somalis to forge a nation were torn asunder by the assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke in October 1969.<sup>3</sup> This move set the stage for a military coup that ended with the installment of General Mohamed Siad Barre, who would nominally rule Somalia for over 20 years. Throughout the reign of Siad Barre, Somalia continued its descent into chaos. The 1977-1978 failed war with Ethiopia highlighted the weakness of Siad Barre's government and brought a resurgence of clan-based loyalties to the forefront.<sup>4</sup> Following Somalia's defeat in the war against Ethiopia in 1978 Siad Barre survived an attempted coup, illustrating the tenuous hold he had on the government. Along with this attempted coup came the formation of opposition groups, mostly clan-based and dedicated to the violent overthrow of the Siad Barre regime. From the

late 1970s through the mid 1980s, these clan-based difficulties began to simmer and eventually reached the boiling point in the late 1980s.

By 1988, Siad Barre's government faced a full-blown civil war brought about primarily by inter-clan rivalries and hatred. Clan-based opposition groups began armed revolt against the Siad Barre regime, seizing large portions of the country and threatening Mogadishu itself. The civil war "uprooted half a million people, devastated the economy and sharply reduced food production."<sup>5</sup> This disruption of food production spawned the famine that struck Somalia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, since only a small portion of Somali territory is capable of supporting food production.

In January 1991, after almost three years of bloody civil war, Siad Barre fled Mogadishu, yielding control of Somalia to various clans and factions.<sup>6</sup> With the dissolution of the Somali national army large quantities of heavy weapons, from machine guns to tanks to artillery pieces, fell into the hands of the clans, increasing their lethality in future battles. Most important, the collapse of the central government ushered in an era of lawless anarchy where various clan-based opposition movements vied for control of key regions and cities. The Somali people, who were suffering through an intense famine with over 1.5 million people in desperate need of external aid to stave off the effects of starvation, were the real losers of this civil war.<sup>7</sup>

One such clan, the Hawiye, initially formed the United Somali Congress (USC), but after several years of civil war, intra-clan rivalries began to develop. The capital city of Mogadishu was a prize contested by the two primary subdivisions of the Hawiye clan, the Habr Gidr subclan under the control of General Mohamed Farah Aideed and the Abgal subclan under the control of Ali Mahdi Mohamed.<sup>8</sup> Aideed's forces controlled southern Mogadishu, while northern Mogadishu remained in the control of forces loyal to Ali Mahdi. This contest for Mogadishu would become one of the key components in the chaos surrounding Somalia in the early 1990s.

A need arose for an external body to help the Somali people emerge from this chaos of civil war and the resulting famine. This external body would need to broker a peace and then be capable of monitoring or enforcing the peace. Also, this external body had to bring desperately needed relief to the local populace dying of starvation. The United Nations seemed to be the perfect organization to fill this void.

## **Enter the United Nations**

The UN had maintained a presence in Somalia since the late 1970s, focusing primarily on refugee management and distribution of relief supplies



and food.<sup>9</sup> These services had been disrupted on several occasions as a result of civil war and inter-clan fighting. UN officials, however, still sought to reduce the suffering of the Somali population. By early 1992, in conjunction with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Council of the League of Arab States, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) urged all parties involved in the conflict to cease hostilities.<sup>10</sup> At this time, the UN also imposed an arms embargo on Somalia to prevent the clans from gaining additional weapons and expanding the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

### *United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM) I*

On 3 March 1992, Aideed and Ali Mahdi signed a UN-brokered cease-fire agreement and consented to UN monitoring of this agreement.<sup>12</sup> While fighting continued throughout the rest of Somalia, major fighting in Mogadishu ended for a period. Over the next several months, the UN began deploying military observers and a small (500-man) security force under the auspices of UNOSOM I, involving several different countries. Pakistan contributed to these initial UNOSOM I forces, with Pakistani Brigadier General Imtiaz Shaheen serving as the chief military observer.<sup>13</sup> These military observers were to monitor the cease-fire agreement between the Habr Gidr and Abgal subclans, while the security force was to provide protection for humanitarian operations and the unarmed observer force. Perhaps the greatest weakness of UNOSOM I, besides its inadequate military force, was its single focus on Mogadishu; it neglected the rest of the war-torn nation.

By November 1992, open hostilities existed between UNOSOM I forces and major clans within Mogadishu, including the recently formed Somali National Alliance (SNA) that was based primarily on Aideed's Habr Gidr clan. With Somali initiation of hostilities, it became clear that UNOSOM I would be unable to bring stability to Mogadishu, not to mention the rest of Somalia. The UN had to consider more forceful options as 1992 drew to a close since UNOSOM I could not accomplish its mission.

### *Unified Task Force (UNITAF)*

In December 1992, following the failure of UNOSOM I, the UNSC requested the United States form and lead a Unified Task Force (UNITAF) with the primary mission of bringing international control to the region. Forming UNITAF was a significant shift, as it took control away from the UN and placed it fully in the hands of the US which would act in the UN's stead.<sup>14</sup> UNITAF would be the first invocation of the UN Charter's Chapter VII to deal with a conflict contained within a single state's borders.<sup>15</sup> Under Chapter VII, UN forces were authorized to engage in peace enforcement using military force to restore peace and stability to the anarchy brewing

in Somalia. UNITAF eventually grew to over 38,000 personnel, with the United States providing the core of these forces—a nearly 28,000-man commitment (centered primarily on a marine expeditionary force [MEF]).<sup>16</sup> The stated mission of UNITAF was to resolve the immediate security problems within Somalia. There was a great deal of discussion within the UNSC about disarming the clans and other warring factions, but it never expanded UNITAF's charter to include disarmament of the clans. Therefore, the US-led force was only required to enforce a tenuous peace.<sup>17</sup> UNITAF rapidly began deployment to the country through this mission.

Unlike UNOSOM I, UNITAF quickly expanded its influence throughout Somalia, controlling nine key towns within three weeks of its arrival.<sup>18</sup> UNITAF elements secured important transportation facilities and food distribution centers and began providing security to relief convoys, delivering critically needed food, and ending the famine by late January 1993. UNITAF, with its peace-enforcement charter and significant force structure, threatened the use of force and ultimately gained compliance from the warring clans, bringing relative peace to the region. By March 1993, the resounding success of UNITAF paved the way for a subsequent UN-led operation that would carry on the Chapter VII functions of UNITAF. For the first time in over 10 years, conditions were set for a restoration of peace in Somalia, but the clans still had great potential to control the region.

### *United Nations Operations in Somalia—UNOSOM II*

In May of 1993, yet another historic step occurred when the UNSC established UNOSOM II, the first ever UN-led peace-enforcement operation authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.<sup>19</sup> UNOSOM II's mission was to build on the success of UNITAF by continuing to establish a secure environment throughout Somalia. In addition to the standard security tasks, UNOSOM II would be given the tasks of disarming the factions and controlling all heavy weapons previously belonging to the clans.

UNOSOM II initially consisted of approximately 28,000 troops under the command of Turkish Lieutenant General Cevik Bir.<sup>20</sup> The US commitment to UNOSOM II consisted of logistics units remaining in Somalia from the previous UNITAF mission but expanded to include an airmobile infantry task force (from the 10th Mountain Division), which served as the mission's quick reaction force (QRF). Also, the United States stationed a joint task force (JTF) off the Somali coast and maintained that force under US control. This JTF served as a visible reminder of the US commitment to back this UN-led operation. Like its UNITAF predecessor, UNOSOM II

provided a credible deterrent to a resurgence of violence in Somalia.

Initially, UNOSOM II seemed more than capable of expanding on the successes won by UNITAF, but by early June 1993, UNOSOM II forces found themselves in increasingly hostile contact with the local clans. Much of the hostility seemed to have resulted from attempts to disarm the clans, something that did not appeal to the clan leaders. The most extreme incident occurred on 5 June 1993, when an element of Aideed's SNA ambushed a UNOSOM II convoy and attacked a unit guarding a food distribution center, causing the deaths of 24 Pakistani peacekeepers and wounding an additional 56 Pakistani troops.<sup>21</sup> These attacks signaled the beginning of a new era of hostilities that would test the resolve of both the UN and the US.

Based on these attacks, the UNSC authorized UNOSOM II to begin capturing those responsible for attacking UN forces. Further incidents between UNOSOM II forces and Aideed's SNA continued throughout the summer. During this period, UN forces also began to take a more aggressive stance, leading to a helicopter gunship attack on a clan meeting on 12 July 1993 that produced significant casualties for Aideed's Habr Gidr clan.<sup>22</sup> By the end of September, UNOSOM II would suffer additional casualties attempting to enforce peace in a lawless Mogadishu. As casualties mounted, the UN began to take greater interest in capturing the clan leaders responsible for these attacks. At the top of the list was Mohamed Farah Aideed.

From a US standpoint, perhaps the most significant attack occurred on 8 August 1993, when four US Army military policemen were killed when a remotely detonated mine blew up their vehicle.<sup>23</sup> A similar incident occurred on 22 August, wounding seven US soldiers. These incidents caused the Clinton administration to shift the United States to the offensive. Retired US Admiral Jonathon Howe, UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Somalia, had been pressuring the Clinton administration, since the initial attacks in June, for special operations forces (SOF) capable of capturing enemy clan leaders.<sup>24</sup> The catalyst for committing these needed SOF forces had finally occurred.

### *TF Ranger Arrives in Mogadishu*

As a response to the August attacks on US forces, President Clinton ordered the deployment of TF *Ranger* to Mogadishu, for Operation GOTHIC SERPENT. During the preceding months, the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) had sent two different reconnaissance parties to Mogadishu to determine the feasibility of capturing Aideed and to gain an initial intelligence assessment.<sup>25</sup> They reported that the capture of

Aideed was possible since he made very public movements. However, by July Aideed had significantly curtailed his public appearances, making the likelihood of capturing him quite remote. Despite poor chances of success, TF *Ranger*, a 450-man elite unit commanded by US Army Major General William Garrison, arrived in Mogadishu in late August 1993.

The task force was to work outside of the normal UN command structure. Although Admiral Howe had relentlessly lobbied for the commitment of TF *Ranger*, the UN force commander had absolutely no control over this force; TF *Ranger* only coordinated its operations with the UN deputy force commander, US Army Major General Thomas Montgomery.<sup>26</sup> This coordination was essential to ensure that UN forces did not stumble into a TF *Ranger* raid and that TF *Ranger* would have needed support from the UN's QRF if ever encountering significant enemy resistance. Therefore, while TF *Ranger* was essentially doing the bidding of the UN, it did not report to or receive orders from the UN chain of command.

The TF *Ranger* plan was broken down into three distinct phases.<sup>27</sup> Phase I was the preparation phase where the elite soldiers of TF *Ranger* would get acclimated, familiarize themselves with the local area, and train with an element of the QRF to ensure interoperability between the two forces. Phase II was devoted to capturing Aideed. Major General Garrison planned to devote seven days to this phase, as he believed that if Aideed were not captured in the first week, he would never be captured. Phase III of the operation involved taking down Aideed's infrastructure to prevent him from prosecuting his war against UNOSOM II.

After spending its initial week in Somalia, TF *Ranger* was ready to transition to Phase II of the operation, and actively sought to accomplish its primary mission: the capture of Aideed. From its base at the Mogadishu Airport, the task force deployed for its first mission. On 30 August, an element of TF *Ranger* conducted a heliborne-assault to raid the Lig Lagato compound (the suspected origin of a mortar attack on TF *Ranger*'s base camp the previous day).<sup>28</sup> Intelligence available to the task force was faulty, at best, and this operation resulted in the elite forces raiding a UN compound and detaining nine UN employees. This was an inauspicious start for the task force and caused many in Washington to question if TF *Ranger* could possibly accomplish their assigned mission, a mission similar to trying to find one specific needle in a large stack of them.

After the Lig Lagato raid of 30 August, TF *Ranger* conducted an additional five raids throughout the month of September 1993. As anticipated, Major General Garrison quickly determined that actually capturing Aideed, with the limited intelligence TF *Ranger* developed and received, would be highly improbable; therefore, he decided to transition

to Phase III: dismantling Aideed's infrastructure and chain of command. On 21 September 1993, the task force conducted an extremely successful mission, seizing Osman Atto, Aideed's chief financier and a senior member of the Habr Gidr clan.<sup>29</sup> Operations soon began to focus on capturing Aideed's top lieutenants, who were referred to as "Tier One" personalities.

The task force's initial six missions were conducted in a similar fashion and established observable patterns. These missions consisted of several elements working in close coordination with one another. Typically, an element would be inserted into the objective area by helicopter, using a technique known as "fast roping."<sup>30</sup> The initial force inserted would be the ground assault force, consisting of small teams of SOF, to clear the objective and capture the assigned target personnel. Additional forces would establish blocking positions at key intersections to isolate the objective.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the mission, helicopters would remain overhead to provide support in the event of significant enemy resistance.

In an effort to mislead the enemy about the time and place of operations, Garrison ordered TF *Ranger* to conduct signature flights, which consisted of groups of helicopters loaded with fully armed, TF *Ranger* soldiers departing the airfield at varying times to keep Aideed's forces off guard.<sup>32</sup> The task force also conducted similar operations using ground convoys. Garrison did everything in his power to avoid becoming predictable and giving the enemy the opportunity to seize the initiative.

### *The Battle of the Black Sea*

The afternoon of 3 October 1993 presented a golden opportunity for TF *Ranger* to dismantle Aideed's infrastructure. Intelligence reports from a Somali spy indicated that senior members of Aideed's Habr Gidr clan planned to meet that afternoon in the Bakara Market region of south Mogadishu.<sup>33</sup> As intelligence confirmed the meeting's time and place, TF *Ranger* leaders and planners developed a plan to raid the meeting place near Mogadishu's Olympic Hotel. This raid would subsequently become known as the Battle of the Black Sea.

The leaders and planners decided that, as with the previous missions, helicopters would deliver the various troops to their specified locations around the objective; multiple helicopters would deposit the ground assault force in close proximity to the target building, and would then drop the Rangers into blocking positions to isolate the building. A ground convoy, consisting of nine high mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) and three 5-ton trucks, would extract the "precious cargo"

seized during the raid.<sup>34</sup> This same ground convoy would then extract the ground forces. With the planning complete, last-minute checks were made, and the ground force loaded the helicopters.

At 1530, 16 TF *Ranger* helicopters lifted off from the airport carrying approximately 100 heavily armed soldiers into the battle.<sup>35</sup> The flight departed the airfield, traveling south over the Indian Ocean and then turned back inland, heading toward the Bakara Market region. At approximately 1540, TF *Ranger*'s lead helicopters began hovering around the target building, allowing the ground assault element to fast rope to the ground and begin the assault. As the Rangers were inserted into their blocking positions, a young Ranger, Private First Class Todd Blackburn, fell while attempting to fast rope in, suffering a nearly 70-foot fall to the Somali street below. This left him seriously injured and in need of immediate evacuation and medical support.<sup>36</sup> This would be the first of many things to go wrong that day.

As the Rangers established their blocking positions and cared for the injured Blackburn, the ground assault force cleared the target building. In short order, effective Somali resistance in the target building had been neutralized and the members of the ground assault force had begun rounding up the precious cargo. As the soldiers of TF *Ranger* went about their business, armed Somalis began to converge on the area, and incoming hostile fire increased dramatically. Meanwhile, the ground convoy arrived in the area and began loading the precious cargo while steps were being taken to evacuate Blackburn.<sup>37</sup> At this point, considering that US forces were in the heart of Aideed's stronghold under heavy Somali fire, the operation was going well, with the exception of Blackburn's injury.

Upon inserting the ground force, TF *Ranger*'s helicopters orbited the objective area, providing necessary fire support for the ground forces and doing their best to keep the armed Somalis from closing in on the Ranger blocking positions. Just as the ground forces were preparing for extraction, a Somali-fired rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) struck the tail rotor of the MH-60 Black Hawk (radio callsign *Super Six One*) piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Cliff Wolcott.<sup>38</sup> The aircraft crashed approximately four blocks northeast of the target building, going in hard, killing both pilots and injuring several soldiers in the cargo compartment of the aircraft. The worst-case scenario had just occurred—TF *Ranger* had a helicopter down in the very heart of Aideed's south Mogadishu stronghold.

The downed Black Hawk forced TF *Ranger* to react to the Somalis. Up until this point, the Ranger element was imposing its will upon the enemy, but with the loss of *Super Six One*, the Somalis had begun to seize the initiative. TF *Ranger*'s initial response was to move part of the northeast blocking position, under Ranger Lieutenant Tom DiTomasso, to secure

the crash site.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, an MH-6 “Little Bird” light helicopter (radio callsign *Star Four One*) landed near the crash site and evacuated the two most seriously wounded soldiers, leaving the remaining soldiers, now reinforced by DiTomasso’s Rangers, to secure the crash site and wait for help.<sup>40</sup> Additional assistance came as the Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) force was inserted into the crash site via fast rope, adding another 14 soldiers to secure the perimeter.<sup>41</sup> Even though the crash site was secure, its location approximately four blocks from the target building complicated the extraction and the recovery of the remains of the pilots who were pinned in the wreckage.

While forces moved to secure the downed helicopter, Lieutenant Colonel Danny McKnight, commander of the wheeled ground convoy, prepared to extract the precious cargo and forces near the target building. Casualties were mounting and many soldiers were wounded due to the heavy volume of Somali fire. Parts of the initial ground force were loading onto the vehicles of the ground convoy, while other members moved on foot to the crash site; the situation was chaotic. All the while, leaders attempted to account for each individual soldier to ensure that once the force was extracted, no one would be left behind. The ground convoy was to move to the Wolcott crash site for linkup with all elements of the force and conduct final extraction from that site.

Just as McKnight began to move the ground convoy toward the Wolcott crash site, Somali gunners found their mark on another MH-60 Black Hawk, hitting *Super Six Four*, piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Mike Durant.<sup>42</sup> Durant lost control of his aircraft when he tried to initially assess the damage, and crash-landed his helicopter approximately eight blocks south of the target building. The situation had just gone from bad to worse. Nearly 150 men of TF *Ranger* spread out over an area encompassing approximately one square mile of urban terrain were surrounded by hundreds of armed Somalis. The US forces concentrated around the vicinity of the target building and the Wolcott crash site, with only the four-man crew of *Super Six Four* isolated and far from friendly forces.

The focus of the operation now shifted to the need to secure *Super Six Four*. In an effort to secure the crash site, two TF *Ranger* snipers, Master Sergeant Gary Gordon and Sergeant First Class Randy Shughart, volunteered to be inserted from MH-60 *Super Six Two*.<sup>43</sup> Gordon and Shughart assessed the wreckage and the casualties while fending off the growing Somali mobs. In short order the crash site was overrun, and Durant was the sole survivor.<sup>44</sup> While Gordon and Shughart attempted to secure the crash site, Rangers from the airfield mounted a hasty rescue convoy that was forced to return to the base due to heavy Somali fire and significant casualties.<sup>45</sup>

The extraction plan once again shifted. As a result of the loss of *Super Six Four*, the Wolcott crash site remained the consolidation point for ground forces to link up with the ground convoy. All the soldiers would load onto the vehicles of the ground convoy from the Wolcott crash site, and then the entire force would move to the Durant crash site. The majority of the ground assault force and the Rangers from the blocking position were moving on foot toward the Wolcott crash site anyway when Durant's *Super Six Four* was shot down. Lieutenant Colonel McKnight, with the wheeled ground convoy, attempted to negotiate the maze of Somali streets to link up with the forces at the Wolcott crash site. Due to barricaded streets, confusing directions, and heavy enemy fire, the ground convoy never made it to the Wolcott crash site. In light of significant casualties (approximately 50 percent of the force), McKnight ordered the ground convoy to return to the airfield, in the process running the gauntlet of Somali fire to reach safety.<sup>46</sup>

It was now early evening, and the situation around the Wolcott crash site was precarious. The CSAR team and DiTomasso's Rangers had secured the crash site but were under heavy fire and suffering significant casualties. Meanwhile, the other ground forces moving toward the crash site on foot had been pinned down by heavy Somali fire, establishing three separate strong points approximately a block apart.<sup>47</sup> Heavy Somali fire kept them pinned down and frustrated their intent to link up with one another or the forces at the Wolcott crash site.

Throughout the late afternoon, Major General Garrison and some of the TF *Ranger* staff had attempted to organize a relief convoy consisting of a company from the 10th Mountain Division, the UNOSOM II QRF.<sup>48</sup> By early evening, this force, consisting of 12 HMMWVs and nine 2.5-ton trucks, attempted to fight its way into the Durant crash site but was turned back by intense Somali fire.<sup>49</sup> Having failed with this initial attempt, the planners set about forming a multinational relief force based around Lieutenant Colonel Bill David's 2-14 Infantry, consisting of numerous HMMWVs and several 2.5-ton trucks, augmented by four Pakistani tanks and 28 Malaysian armored personnel carriers (APCs).<sup>50</sup> The commitment of this force would take some time to plan and organize; thus, the isolated element of TF *Ranger* in Aideed's stronghold had to strengthen its positions and hold out for assistance.

The disparate parts of TF *Ranger* attempted to locate all of their forces and establish a working direct-fire plan around the Wolcott crash site. Meanwhile, AH-6 "Little Bird" light attack helicopters were performing heroic service, executing gun and rocket runs to keep the Somali armed mobs from overrunning the TF *Ranger* positions. The situation began to



stabilize as night fell, but concern for the many wounded, dwindling supplies of ammunition, and lack of water and night-vision gear began to put pressure on commanders.<sup>51</sup> As night fell, TF *Ranger* helicopters hovered over the strong points to deliver desperately needed water, medical supplies, and ammunition. The men of TF *Ranger* then hunkered down, established and marked their perimeters, attempted to care for their wounded, and waited for the promised relief column.

At 2330, the relief column departed the New Port base of the Pakistani forces.<sup>52</sup> The plan that Lieutenant Colonel David had developed included two separate forces: the largest to move to the Wolcott crash site and extract the embattled men of TF *Ranger* and a second, smaller force to move to the Durant crash site and search for survivors. The columns would move together initially and then separate to move to the different crash sites.<sup>53</sup> The relief convoy ran a gauntlet of Somali fire as it moved through the narrow streets of Mogadishu. Two of the Malaysian APCs took a wrong turn and were ambushed on a side street by a group of Somalis.<sup>54</sup> The remainder of the convoy moved to assigned objectives, through hard fighting all the way, eventually linking up with the beleaguered soldiers of TF *Ranger* at the Wolcott crash site and finding the wreckage of *Super Six Four* at the Durant crash site.<sup>55</sup>

At the Wolcott crash site, soldiers from the relief convoy established an expanded perimeter, giving some respite to the members of TF *Ranger* who had already been in contact for almost 12 hours. As a result of the arrival of the heavily armed relief column, enemy contact at the Wolcott crash site greatly diminished. The wounded were loaded into the Malaysian APCs to provide some level of safety while they waited for the relief column to depart the crash site. The final tasks were to remove Wolcott's remains from the wreckage of *Super Six One* and for the leaders of TF *Ranger* to account for all of their soldiers and load them onto the vehicles of the relief convoy. Unfortunately, it took over 3 hours to extract Wolcott's remains from the wreckage, and the soldiers of TF *Ranger* and the relief convoy did not depart the crash site until the sun had started to rise.<sup>56</sup> The chaos and confusion of the extraction, coupled with the haste of the convoy drivers rushing to get out of the area before the cloak of darkness had lifted, left approximately 40 members of TF *Ranger* running behind the quickly departing convoy, fighting their way out on foot.<sup>57</sup> These soldiers eventually caught up with the vehicles when the convoy halted outside the Somali cordon.

As the task force and the relief convoy arrived at the Mogadishu soccer stadium, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) accounted for their soldiers and determined casualties, while medical personnel worked to

treat the many wounded. The final cost of the Battle of the Black Sea was 18 US soldiers killed and over 70 wounded. From the Somali standpoint, 3 October became known as the “Day of the Rangers.”<sup>58</sup> From Major General Garrison’s standpoint, his force had just delivered a crushing blow to Aideed’s Habr Gidr; therefore, the time had come to exploit the victory. But orders from Washington precluded further military action.<sup>59</sup>

## **In Retrospect**

The Battle of the Black Sea was a tactical victory for TF *Ranger*, but a Pyrrhic one at best. It had gone into Aideed’s stronghold, captured two of his top lieutenants and numerous other subordinate clan leaders, and then withdrew with relatively light casualties considering the odds it faced. The Somalis, though, had suffered greatly as a result of the battle, with US military firepower inflicting an estimated 1,000 casualties, with at least 500 dead.<sup>60</sup> Whether it may have been a victory at the tactical level, this battle signaled a failure at the strategic level of war.

Most Americans believed that US forces were in Somalia as part of a UN humanitarian operation bringing food to the starving populace of an African nation. As the news media began reporting the battle’s aftermath, the large numbers of casualties shocked the average American, who likely had not heard of TF *Ranger* or Mohamed Farah Aideed. The American people then demanded answers from the government. Unfortunately, the significant casualties suffered in a small raid also shocked the Clinton administration. The president could not justify these casualty numbers, due to the operation’s ambiguous national aims, and lacked the resolve to continue the fight. The administration, and the public, had also been stunned by televised photos of Somali mobs dragging an American corpse through the streets. Thus, on 5 October 1993, President Clinton, in a meeting with his top national security advisers, decided to withdraw all US troops from Somalia by March 1994. The US had essentially lost in Somalia, leaving many to echo the question posed by President Clinton, “How could this happen?”<sup>61</sup>

The answer to this question singles out one culprit: the victory disease. Just like in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, an arrogant belief in the superiority of US forces coupled with a complacent underestimation of the opponent, resulted in defeat at Mogadishu. The members of TF *Ranger* used already established patterns that allowed the Somalis to seize the initiative and then inflict significant casualties upon the United States, ultimately forcing us to withdraw in defeat.

## Notes

1. *The United Nations and Somalia 1992-1996*, The United Nations Blue Book Series, vol. 8 (New York: The United Nations Department of Public Information, 1996), 9.

2. Ibid., 9.

3. Ibid., 91.

4. Ibid., 11.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 91.

7. Ibid., 21.

8. Ibid., 12.

9. Ibid., 15.

10. Ibid., 17.

11. Ibid., 18.11.

12. Ibid., 92.

13. Ibid., 26-27.

14. Ibid., 33.

15. Ibid., 4.

16. Kenneth Allard, *Somalia Operations: Lessons Learned* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1995), 17.

17. The United Nations and Somalia, 32.

18. Ibid., 34.

19. Ibid., 40.

20. Ibid., 43-44.

21. Ibid., 50.

22. Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), 72-74 and 94-95. On the morning of 12 July 1993, US helicopter gunships of the QRF attacked the house of Abdi Hassan Awale (also known as Qeybdid). UN intelligence had received reports that this was the site of a high-level meeting of leaders of the Habr Gidr clan. This attack resulted in between 20 and 75 Somalis killed.

23. Bowden, 95.

24. Ibid., 95.

25. Major General (Ret) William Garrison, interview by author, 21 January 2003, tape recording, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Bowden, 26.

29. Bowden, 96. Intelligence surfaced regarding the movement of this member of Aideed's inner circle. Upon identifying the vehicle convoy transporting Atto through the streets of Mogadishu, members of the task force conducted a daylight assault on the moving convoy and captured Atto. Atto was imprisoned with other SNA leaders on Camia Island, off the southern port city of Kismayo.

30. "Fast roping" is a technique similar to standard rappelling, and is a very rapid way to descend from a helicopter hovering 25 to 100 feet above the ground. In fast roping a large-diameter rope is dropped from the hovering helicopter. Soldiers, wearing heavy leather gloves, then jump out of the helicopter, onto the rope, and then slide down it, much like sliding down a fireman's pole.

31. The blocking positions were generally established by elements of Company B, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

32. Lawrence Casper, *Falcon Brigade: Combat and Command in Somalia and Haiti* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 37.

33. Garrison, interview by author, 21 January 2003. The Bakara Market was located in the heart of Aideed's stronghold. TF *Ranger* Commander, Major General Garrison, knew that his forces had approximately 30 minutes in this part of the city before they would become decisively engaged.

34. In TF *Ranger* parlance, "precious cargo" or (PC), referred to the captured Somali clan leaders.

35. Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey, *Mogadishu! Heroism and Tragedy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), xi.

36. Bowden, 16.

37. Three HMMWVs from the ground convoy broke off from the main convoy to evacuate Private First Class Blackburn. This small evacuation convoy ran the gauntlet of Somali fire, fighting its way back to the Ranger compound at the airfield. On this treacherous journey, TF *Ranger* lost its first soldier, Sergeant Dominick Pilla.

38. Bowden, 79.

39. Ibid., 84-85.

40. DeLong and Tuckey, 16.

41. While inserting the CSAR team, MH-60 *Super Six Eight*, piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Dan Jollata, was hit while the team was fast roping down. Jollata held his aircraft steady, under intense ground fire, until all the members of the CSAR team made it safely to the ground. Jollata then limped his crippled aircraft back to the airfield, barely clearing the perimeter fence before making a crash landing.

42. Bowden, 102-103.

43. For this act of heroism, Master Sergeant Gordon and Sergeant First Class

Shughart were posthumously awarded the nation's highest military award, the Medal of Honor. They were the first recipients of this prestigious award since the end of the Vietnam War.

44. Durant was captured by the Somalis and endured an 11-day captivity. Durant suffered a broken back and leg during the crash and numerous injuries due to beatings he received at the time of his capture.

45. Bowden, 160-164.

46. *Ibid.*, 339.

47. *Ibid.*, 200.

48. DeLong and Tuckey, xii. This unit, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry, was the alert company for the QRF. As such, it was on 30-minute alert upon notification that TF *Ranger* was preparing for an operation. When requested by the TF *Ranger* liaison, the QRF company was forced by enemy presence to take a circuitous route to the airfield, arriving at the TF *Ranger* base at 1724.

49. Bowden, 147.

50. *Ibid.*, 263-64.

51. Bowden, 242-243. As a result of the impossibility of medical evacuation from this position, Corporal Jamie Smith died of wounds received during this battle, bleeding to death in a Somali hut.

52. DeLong and Tuckey, xii.

53. Bowden, 271.

54. DeLong and Tuckey, 68-69.

55. At the Durant crash site, members of TF *Ranger* who had accompanied the relief column used thermite grenades to destroy the wreckage, ensuring that the Somalis could not salvage valuable military hardware from the downed helicopter.

56. DeLong and Tuckey, xii.

57. *Ibid.*, 94.

58. Bowden, 331.

59. Garrison, interview by author, 21 January 2003.

60. Bowden, 333.

61. *Ibid.*, 304.



## **Chapter 4**

### **The Search for a Vaccine**

President Clinton's haunting question in light of the Mogadishu loss might be asked about any military defeat and was certainly asked by a shocked nation after the Little Bighorn. Truly understanding how a powerful nation like the United States can be defeated by an inferior foe requires in-depth analysis of the victory disease's symptoms. Then, once one truly understands these symptoms the quest for a vaccine becomes much simpler.

The victory disease evolves from a compounding of its symptoms that, if left unchecked, make any military operation highly susceptible to failure. This debilitating disease can occur at any of the three levels of war (tactical, operational, or strategic), as was illustrated by the previous case studies. Thus far we have only briefly touched on these symptoms. This chapter will analyze the symptoms in detail and demonstrate that the victory disease was a proximate cause in both case-study defeats. It will also show that current military leaders and planners can immunize themselves by exposing the disease's growth within a military plan.

#### **Setting the Conditions**

Certain preconditions are requisite for the illness to occur. Most important, the nation and its military must be a current power with recent victories. In many cases, military forces suffering from recent ignominious defeat are quick to analyze their failings and take corrective action, while victorious militaries rarely think through ways to improve. History more often records the phoenix rising from the ashes, not the victor thoroughly analyzing a recent success, though this is not always the case.<sup>1</sup> The United States is currently susceptible to succumbing to the victory disease based solely on having vast national strength and a proven military.

#### *Arrogance*

The growth of the disease starts with arrogance. National pride in past military accomplishment is a natural human tendency, yet it is also the breeding ground for arrogance. As arrogance grows, a snowballing effect occurs. The growth of this symptom begins at higher levels and then builds as it filters down through an organization.

A nation with a strong, proven military and a highly developed economy will naturally display national pride; unfortunately, this may develop into arrogance on the national level and within the general populace. This leads to an expectation for quick, decisive victories in almost any undertaking,

especially a military conflict. At the strategic level of war, senior military leaders begin to believe their vastly superior forces may be matchless. At the operational and tactical levels, military units embrace strategic-level arrogance while fostering a more personal, unit-specific arrogance based on its particular battlefield victories.

In the case of the Little Bighorn, arrogance was evident across all levels of war. A feeling of invincibility that existed at the national level filtered down to the ranks of the 7th Cavalry Regiment and created disdain for its Indian adversary. Several factors caused this egotism at the national-strategic level. First, the recent victory over the Confederacy convinced many Americans of the almost invincible nature of the Union Army. President Grant and Generals Sherman and Sheridan thought the frontier army perfectly capable of forcing the hostile Indians onto the reservation and militarily solving a problem diplomacy could not fix.

At the tactical level, the 7th Cavalry displayed remarkable overconfidence, clearly demonstrated by how Custer viewed his Indian adversary. During the 1868 Battle of the Washita, when a subordinate speculated they might find more Indians than they could handle, Custer reportedly said, "There are not enough Indians in the country to whip the Seventh Cavalry."<sup>2</sup> Custer's conceit seems to have trickled down to his subordinates, causing them to also believe in their indestructibility.<sup>3</sup>

In 1993, TF *Ranger* was also affected by arrogance, only here it was far more evident at the higher levels rather than the tactical level. Arrogance manifested itself in a false belief that US forces were invincible and in a belief that TF *Ranger* could not fail in its assigned mission. Less than three years before the US military had achieved an unprecedented victory over Iraq in Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, defeating the Iraqi army in a 100-hour ground offensive and suffering few casualties. As hostilities in Somalia mounted, the Clinton administration began searching for military solutions. According to Major General Garrison, the Clinton administration was consistently pressured by Admiral Howe and senior UN leaders and eventually became desperate for a solution, finally yielding to this pressure more out of ignorance than arrogance.<sup>4</sup> Even though his senior military commanders, including Garrison and General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained that capturing Aideed was virtually impossible, President Clinton still committed TF *Ranger* to Somalia. One cannot help but believe President Clinton, despite his advisers' doubts, still thought TF *Ranger*'s elite soldiers could easily defeat the Somalis and dismantle Aideed's infrastructure, likely reducing Aideed's threat to UN and American forces.

At the tactical level, the soldiers making up TF *Ranger* were, by nature of their elite status, very self-confident.<sup>5</sup> These soldiers viewed their unit as



possessing a lucky quality that made it nearly invincible and would enable them to capture Aideed.<sup>6</sup> Facing the armed Somali mobs, its loss of initiative and sudden vulnerability came as quite a shock to TF *Ranger*.<sup>7</sup> Much like the Little Bighorn, national leaders, senior military leaders, and even actual battle participants went into operations in Mogadishu dangerously proud, an attitude that was quickly lost as casualties mounted.

Arrogance grows out of a nation's strength and proven military prowess and tricks the nation's leadership, populace, and military leaders into believing that victory is almost a foregone conclusion. Pride swells and grows into the next symptom—complacency.

### *Complacency*

Complacency stems from the belief that one's own forces are unstoppable and invincible; it primarily begins in the planning stage of operations. Nowhere in the planning process is complacency more evident than when little examination of the enemy's culture takes place. A superficial cultural understanding of the enemy makes it impossible to determine how he might react to one's actions.<sup>8</sup> Complacency is also often evident when purely superficial plans are designed based on the false belief the enemy cannot disrupt friendly actions.

The Little Bighorn is an excellent example of complacency affecting a battle's outcome. At the strategic level, complacency led to a flawed plan. President Grant's ultimatum that the roamers surrender at various agencies no later than 31 January 1876 indicates superficial planning, since the task was impossible in the northern plain's winter climate.<sup>9</sup> The eagerness of Generals Sherman and Sheridan to execute a winter campaign was not well thought out either, since two of the three envisioned converging columns could not mount expeditions because of the climate and inadequate preparation. In both of these strategic-level examples complacency led to poor analysis and poor planning.

As one examines the tactical level, perhaps the most striking absence is the lack of cultural intelligence. Although Custer had been on the plains for almost 10 years he still did not understand the Indian culture; he could not effectively predict the Indian reaction to a given stimulus. In essence, Custer maintained a basic knowledge of common Indian reactions to friendly actions but scarcely understood the "why" behind these reactions.<sup>10</sup> Complacency led Custer to underestimate the size of the enemy force and its fighting prowess. Lieutenant Charles Varnum, 7th Cavalry Chief of Scouts, related dire warnings to Custer about the vast size of the village ahead, but Custer refused to believe these frontier veterans.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the highly respected frontier scout Mitch Boyer warned Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, one of Custer's troop commanders, that a huge encampment was

ahead, and he likely told Custer.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Custer did not even attempt to gain intelligence about the Indian village's size and composition after crossing between the Rosebud and Little Bighorn valleys; instead, he positioned his scouts to screen his advance approximately two miles forward of his main body, limiting his own ability to develop a coherent plan of attack until he was almost upon the village.

In the case of TF *Ranger*, complacency, just like arrogance, is most obvious at the higher levels and, similar to the Little Bighorn, is most evident in the operational planning stages. Prior to the Somali operation, most US political leadership as well as the American people had exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam, thanks in large part to the recent and resounding success of the Gulf War. Essentially, America as a whole no longer feared defeat when committing her military and had become less concerned about military deployments; the average American also believed US forces in Somalia were merely providing humanitarian assistance and was quite shocked by the casualties of 3 and 4 October.<sup>13</sup> The political leaders who committed TF *Ranger*, it seems, did not wish to understand what they were asking these soldiers to do. Complacency led the politicians to not deal with details—they only wanted results.

At the tactical level of war, one finds another example of leaders and soldiers underestimating the enemy. According to Lieutenant Colonel Scott Miller, SOF ground assault force commander, TF *Ranger* had underestimated the enemy and was surprised by the rapid massing of Somali clansmen and the heavy volume of fire, especially in terms of RPGs, that it encountered.<sup>14</sup> Due to complacency, high level plans lacked thorough analysis, and tactical leaders found themselves surprised by a far better prepared enemy than expected.

American national strength and a history of success led to arrogance. Arrogance led to complacency. Complacency then set military leaders and planners up, in these case studies, to habitually use established patterns and potentially lose the initiative when the enemy did not follow predicted reactions.

### *Using Established Patterns*

An afflicted nation and its military leaders and planners too often believe that a standard approach will work for many scenarios. However, this standardization leaves one's forces susceptible to danger. If one's forces use a proven pattern to solve similar problems and the enemy reacts in a standard fashion, then one's forces will likely have success. When the enemy refuses to play predictably and reacts in a new and different manner, the friendly force finds itself on dangerous ground. Since a force afflicted

by the disease has simply gone through the motions of planning, the unexpected enemy reaction will likely so shock the afflicted force that the enemy will gain the initiative. Yielding the initiative to the enemy becomes the most likely cause for imminent defeat. When an enemy has learned to adapt and defeats the afflicted force, the victory disease has won.

The Little Bighorn clearly illustrates how the symptoms can worsen and ultimately develop into a fatal case of the victory disease. At the national level, President Grant's edict ordering the Indians back to the reservations by 31 January 1876, coupled with his threat to use force if necessary, warned them that the frontier army would be coming. Typically, if the Indians believed the Army was attempting to bring them to battle they would disperse and lead US forces on a fruitless, drawn-out pursuit. This time, instead of following their normal pattern the Indians united, forming an enormous village for protection. At the tactical level, Custer dispersed his forces for two reasons that were grounded in already established patterns of combat formed on previous battlefields, such as the Washita and the Powder River.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for the members of the 7th Cavalry, the Indian reaction was not to flee; instead, they attacked Custer's divided command and overwhelmed his battalion. This sudden change of Indian reaction allowed them to seize the initiative and seal the fate of Custer's command.

In the case of Mogadishu, one also sees the impact of using established patterns. Throughout the early summer, attempts by UN forces to disarm the clans had escalated to violence between UNOSOM II and the Habr Gidr clan, forcing the US military to react. TF *Ranger* had conducted missions using similar tactics six times before it attempted to use the same signature flights when attempting to dismantle Aideed's infrastructure, but they did not work as well as anticipated.<sup>16</sup> Washington Post journalist Rick Atkinson quoted a Somali militia commander as saying, "If you use one tactic twice, you should not use it a third time, and the Americans already had done basically the same thing six times."<sup>17</sup>

Whether there was any way to avoid it, TF *Ranger* had become predictable; all the enemy had to do was change its reaction, which is exactly what occurred on 3 October 1993. Instead of simply attacking the Americans with unorganized mobs of armed Somalis, the militia formed units complete with command and control and the basics of direct-fire planning. The militia isolated the trapped Americans within the city by engaging helicopters with massed RPG fire.<sup>18</sup> This primary change allowed the Somalis to seize the initiative and resulted in significant US casualties during the Battle of the Black Sea.

From analyzing these two case studies, it is easy to see how this disease

affects national and military leadership. As the symptoms grow like cancer in a plan, the nation and its military inch closer to failure. At the lower tactical levels, a force that succumbs to the disease may only lose a battle, though at the strategic level it could yield a national failure, as in the case of Mogadishu.

## **The Vaccine**

Armed with a thorough understanding of the victory disease's symptoms we can now begin the quest to vaccinate national and military leaders and planners. Since the sickness can result in failure, real or perceived, the need for a vaccine is obvious. Unfortunately, the vaccine is also so obvious that many cannot see it. Today, many US military leaders seek technological solutions to battlefield problems through increased reliance on computerized analytical tools and sensors. But these technological solutions fall short in finding a victory-disease vaccine.

The only real vaccine is awareness of the disease and its symptoms. National and military leaders must be aware that, provided the initial necessary preconditions exist, this debilitating disease is attempting to work its way into any plan. The military leader and planner must understand these symptoms most often creep in through assumptions made during the planning process but bear their poison fruit during execution. By continually testing the validity of assumptions during the planning process one can limit the victory disease's power. Awareness of the symptoms and understanding the root causes of the disease is the vaccine, and the following chapter deals with how to vaccinate those most susceptible to its effects.

## Notes

1. Many historians and military analysts cite the German army following its invasion of Poland as a case when a successful military force honestly assessed its failings after a victory and improved its system and doctrine. Although this occurred, it must be noted that while Hitler and his party elite were inspired by the quick victory of German arms, his generals saw many deficiencies in their system that they felt a more competent adversary would exploit.

2. Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 65.

3. Camp, *Custer in '76*, 107. In a statement reminiscent of boasts made by Captain William J. Fetterman before the complete destruction of his command in 1866, Lieutenant Varnum, on the banks of the Little Bighorn, said "There are enough of us here to whip the entire Sioux nation."

4. Garrison, interview by author, 21 January 2003.

5. The commanders were so overly confident that they did not ensure standard equipment be brought on the mission. Since this was to be a quick, daylight raid, night optical devices (NOD) they desperately needed after the sun set were left behind. In addition, since they believed they would return quickly (in about one hour), they replaced the normal complement of water with additional ammunition. TF *Ranger* seemed convinced that the enemy could not disrupt the plan.

6. Lieutenant Colonel Scott Miller, interview by author, 31 January 2003, notes, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

7. Casper, *Falcon Brigade*, 38-39.

8. Douglas Scalard, "People of Whom We Know Nothing: When Doctrine Isn't Enough" [article on-line]; available from <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/milrev/English/julaug97/scalard.htm>; Internet; accessed on 22 February 2003. Aldous Huxley's concept of "vincible ignorance" is at work in both case studies where the military lacked cultural intelligence. Based on vincible ignorance, one knows he is ignorant of the enemy's culture but does not regard understanding it essential to victory.

9. The other possible reason for setting this unattainable cutoff date was President Grant's desire to force a war that would defeat the Sioux and provide a more lasting solution to the problem.

10. Custer had no reason to lack cultural awareness of the Sioux when he approached the Little Bighorn since he had exceptional Indian scouts. Custer's Indian scout force primarily consisted of Crow and Arikara scouts, with four Agency Sioux assisting in leading the soldiers to the encampment. These scouts were also an excellent source of information regarding the actions and reactions of the hostile Sioux.

11. Camp, *Custer in '76*, 61.

12. Edward S. Godfrey, *Custer's Last Battle 1876* (Silverthorne, CO: Vista-books, 1976), 17.

13. Rick Atkinson, "The Raid That Went Wrong: How an Elite U.S. Force Failed in Somalia," *The Washington Post*, 30 January 1994, A1.

14. Miller, interview by author, 31 January 2003.

15. Since Custer did not know the exact location and disposition of the Indian village, dispersion enabled him to protect his force by preventing unanticipated attacks to the flanks. This dispersion also allowed the 7th Cavalry to strike the enemy from several different directions, simultaneously.

16. Casper, 37.

17. Atkinson, A27.

18. Once US forces were pinned down in the city the Somalis shifted their focus to preventing a relief convoy from moving to the aid of the isolated force.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Since awareness provides the vaccine, senior military leadership must determine how to increase awareness among leaders and planners. The question this chapter deals with is: “How can US Army leaders and planners raise their level of victory disease awareness?”

#### **When, Where, and How to Conduct Vaccinations**

The best way to vaccinate the US Army Officer Corps is through the Officer Education System (OES), since the officer corps learns military theory, doctrine, and tactics in the various levels of the OES. Currently, the system consists of training and educational courses at the company- and field-grade levels.<sup>1</sup> The education system is broken down into four general levels, initially focusing on branch-specific training then transitioning to more general training at the higher levels.<sup>2</sup> Since officers learn their profession through the OES, it is the most logical place to vaccinate the officer corps.

The vaccine is available through studying military history. Currently, each level of the Army OES includes a study of military history with a slightly different focus in each level. At the lower company-grade level, study focuses on learning American military history and teaching officers the lineage of the military. As officers progress in rank, focus shifts to a study of the evolution of military action and theory, broadening an officer’s understanding of the roots of current doctrine and tactics. To vaccinate the officer corps against the victory disease, each level of the OES must incorporate the study and analysis of failed campaigns.

Along with the case studies highlighted here, several other historical examples seem very appropriate for educating officers about the dangers of the disease. To continually reinforce the concept, campaigns afflicted by the disease for each time period studied should be used.

One such historical example includes the British experience during the Zulu Wars of the late 19th century, when they attempted to colonize the majority of southern Africa and made war with the native Zulu population inevitable. On 22 January 1879, a vastly superior Zulu force attacked a British encampment and annihilated the British force in the Battle of Isandlwana.<sup>3</sup> This battle provides an excellent case study in the victory disease that, when analyzed in conjunction with the Battle of Rorke’s Drift (a British victory that occurred the following day), enables the comparison of victory along side of failure.

Another example is the early stages of the 1973 Yom Kippur War

when Israel initially found itself afflicted by the disease. In this example the Israelis, as a result of their resounding success during the 1967 Six Day War, believed their forces were vastly superior to any possible Arab force. This arrogance caused them to post only limited forces along their borders with Egypt (in the Sinai along the Bar-Lev Line) and Syria (the Golan Heights), trusting these forces would delay an Arab offensive long enough for the Israeli reserve forces to mobilize.<sup>4</sup> This arrogance almost cost Israel its first defeat at the hands of their Arab enemies, a defeat that could have resulted in complete destruction of the Jewish state.

The case studies examined in this work and the above-mentioned campaigns, along with a host of others, provide a wealth of opportunity for victory-disease scholarship. Incorporating their study into the higher-level courses of the OES curriculum will yield the increased awareness necessary to limit the US Army's risk of contracting this deadly disease.

Armed with this increased awareness military leaders and planners must then constantly test their assumptions as they plan and look for signs of arrogance and complacency. The symptoms will likely manifest themselves within these assumptions. Writing Army planning doctrine with an air of humility and ensuring it is historically and culturally sound will go far in vaccinating the entire organization. When developing a course of action, military leaders and planners must also be wary of using established patterns and think instead of creative execution.

## **The Road Ahead**

The military successes of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan and the US-led coalition's resounding tactical success during the initial stages of the 2003 invasion of Iraq predispose the US military to view itself as vastly superior to any enemy. That coalition forces toppled the Hussein regime with ease increases the likelihood US forces, and the nation's populace, could succumb to the victory disease's deadly effects. The necessary preconditions are set, but there is hope.

Following victory over Iraq's regime, coalition forces found themselves engaged in an insurgency while trying to establish a new Iraqi government and rebuild vital infrastructure. Due to US military expertise in both of these operations, national officials, the populace, and many military leaders believed at the outset of the nation-building that their military could achieve a quick, nearly bloodless victory combating this insurgency. This potentially unrealistic expectation is one of the many results of the victory disease.

In order to fight this current, potential sickness in Iraq, US forces must avoid seeing themselves as indestructible and must not use established



patterns. There is hope on the latter front. Since currently serving US forces have only a limited familiarity with battling insurgents (operations in Somalia in the early 1990s and assisting Latin American militaries fighting insurgents in the 1980s), current counterinsurgency operations in Iraq may avoid using established patterns. Prior to these operations, US forces had not conducted counterinsurgency operations since Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. In all of these examples, US forces have experienced only limited success. As a result, current military leaders in Iraq are less likely to adhere to existing techniques, though they may still develop patterns as the current campaign continues.

Aside from the counterinsurgency in Iraq, US forces will likely continue the Global War on Terrorism through the coming years, and the experience of Operations DESERT STORM, ENDURING FREEDOM, and IRAQI FREEDOM further make them susceptible to the disease. While the likelihood of developing the symptoms exists, the vaccine is also within our grasp: awareness of the potential problem. Eroding the US military's self-confidence is not the purpose of this work. Instead, it is to highlight the need for thorough analysis of enemy and friendly forces.

The US military must constantly seek a better understanding of the enemy and be wary of underestimating any adversary and overestimating themselves. National and military leaders must be cognizant of the capabilities and limitations of their own forces, and ensure that they are tasked according to those capabilities. This work has three ultimate goals: to guarantee future success for the US military through maintaining the initiative, to always force the enemy to react, and to defeat any adversary. Having been exposed to the potential for failure, the question we must now ask is: "Will the US Army devote itself to increasing its officers' awareness of the victory disease and its debilitating, deadly effects?"

## Notes

1. Company-grade officers hold the ranks of lieutenant and captain, while field-grade officers are majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels.

2. Newly commissioned lieutenants attend a branch-specific officer basic course (OBC) that focuses on training the officer, with only limited education, branch-specific tactics. Upon promotion to the rank of captain, the officer attends a branch-specific captain's career course (CCC) that again focuses on training but with an increased emphasis on education. In conjunction with the branch-specific CCC, junior captains also attend a staff officer course designed to train them on the skills necessary to perform staff duties at the brigade-level and below. With promotion to the rank of major, each officer receives education through the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. At the senior lieutenant colonel level selected officers attend senior service college. Currently, the US Army is in the process of adjusting its OES.

3. "The Battle of Isandlwana: Wet with Yesterday's Blood" [article on-line]; available from [http://www.battlefields.co.za/history/anglo-zulu\\_war/isandlwana/isandlwana\\_ian%20knight.htm](http://www.battlefields.co.za/history/anglo-zulu_war/isandlwana/isandlwana_ian%20knight.htm); Internet; accessed on 13 December 2002.

4. Avraham Adan, *On the Banks of the Suez: An Israeli General's Personal Account of the Yom Kippur War* (Jerusalem: Edanim Publishers, 1979), 5.

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Major Tim Karcher is currently the battalion operations officer of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division deployed in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. He is a 1989 graduate of the University of Missouri, commissioned in the infantry.

He has earned the Parachutist and Expert Infantryman badges and the Ranger tab. He has served in infantry assignments at Fort Irwin, California and Hohenfels, Germany and also served as a small-group instructor in the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

After attending the US Army Command and General Staff College, Major Karcher completed a master's degree in Theater Operations through the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, which is where he wrote this study.



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