**Frontier War Analysis**

SOURCES consulted and cited where noted:

Collins, Charles D., Jr. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars.* Second ed. William Glen Robertson, Consulting Editor. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006.

Utley, Robert M. *The Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890.* New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1974.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #1: Trouble on the Bozeman Trail - 1866**

**Background:** On the Northern Plains, one of the Army’s major objectives was to keep open the Bozeman trail to newly discovered gold fields in Montana. This mission seemingly lent itself to defensive type operations especially when resources were constrained by manpower shortages and lines of supply were hundreds of miles long. Success under these conditions was also contingent on decisive and resourceful leadership. Unfortunately, the Army units assigned to this mission did not enjoy either of these advantages.

**Causes of the conflict and difficult conditions:**

-The expectations of the Indian Bureau and the real experiences of the Army units assigned to the forts established to guard the Bozeman Trail were not the same.

-Indian Bureau officials believed that most of the hostilities being experienced along the trail could be resolved by Peace Commissioners crafting more treaties with more of the hostile tribes as had been recently done with some success on the Southern Plains.

- Army units, consisting of two battalions from the 18th Infantry, experienced a different reality as they tried to keep the trail open for commerce and settlers heading to Montana. To accomplish this, the Army’s defensive strategy was designed to avoid confrontations with the Indians while the Regular Army was being rebuilt after the release of volunteers left from the Civil War.

-For the tribes through whose land the new trail passed, it proved to be an exceptionally problematic development. All at once, the trail provided a “lure of …treasure to be obtained by barter or theft” (Utley, 101) while it brought in more and more outsiders seeking land and resources. Others hated its delineation of the Indian’s reduced circumstances, loss of hunting lands, and vanishing way of life. Facing these threats, certain bands of the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes along the Powder River saw no alternatives but to fight.

* The Indians viewed the Peace Commissioners’ treaty offers as treacherous.
* The Army’s poorly implemented the supposedly “defensive” strategy.

Most of this inadequacy was centered on the indecisive leadership of Colonel Henry B. Carrington, a politically appointed regimental commander of the 18th Infantry, who had no prior combat experience. While well educated, his expectations of how these challenges were to be addressed were naïve at best. Furthermore, because of his vacillation and faulty assessments of threat conditions along the trail, he does not appear to have been capable of convincing his subordinates at appropriate times of the need for restraint nor was he able to convince his superiors of the need for substantially more man power, better firearms, and more supplies. Carrington’s indecisiveness and poor persuasive skills contributed to a climate of frustration and insubordination which reached its disastrous conclusion in December 1866 through the over-confident actions of Captain William J. Fetterman, a combat veteran of the Civil War, new to the challenges of Indian warfare.

After a series of harassments by the Sioux of wood gathering parties sent out from Fort Phil Kearney earlier in the month, that resulted in the death of sergeant and several men wounded, both the Sioux and the disaffected junior officers of the fort, including Captain Fetterman, were spoiling for a bigger fight. On December 21, 1866, both sides got their chance when another wood train from the fort was attacked. Fetterman was so anxious to take up the relief mission that he pulled rank on another officer to get the assignment. Despite explicit orders from Colonel Carrington to relieve the wood train and not pursue the Indians in broken terrain beyond the ridge, the temptation set by the Indians proved too great for Fetterman and his force of seventy-six soldiers, three officers and two civilians. For the more than 1500 Indians hidden in the broken terrain over the ridge, Fetterman’s pursuing relief force proved to be an irresistible target as they fell for the de facto decoy set-up and their brutal annihilation.

The loss of Fetterman’s entire detachment enraged the Army and highlighted the difficulty of securing the vast distances of the plains. The loss also convinced Sherman and other military men that only a vindictive campaign of “extermination” would solve the problem of the intractable Sioux. While other interests heading west, including military contractors, railroad and other transportation interests echoed the military’s sentiment, more detached voices argued that distinction still had to be made between “enemy combatant” and “non-combatants.” What was clear at the disastrous end of 1866 was that the Army had to reassess its strategy for dealing with the tribes remaining in the West and that this problem would not be resolved quickly or easily.

**Analysis:** Reasons for the failure:

* Shortages of just about every military necessity; manpower, equipment, and competent decisive leadership. These shortages resulted in the soldiers having a difficult time of defending themselves, much less defending the civilians they had originally been sent to protect.
* Leadership: Carrington could not effectively communicate his vision or requirements to subordinates; unable to effectively discipline rogue subordinates
* Inaccurate intelligence about the nature and location of the threat
* A poorly articulated and unsuitable strategy; failed to reasonably linked means with desired outcomes; switched from defensive to offensive operations without proper planning and adequate resources.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #2: Hancock’s War - 1867**

**Hancock Background:**

Winfield Scott Hancock was born in Pennsylvania and graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1844. His first campaign was the Mexican War. By the Civil War, he had risen to the rank of Major General and became best known for his command of the Union Second Corps at Gettysburg where he earned the sobriquet “Hancock the Superb” for holding the center against Pickett’s charge.

After the war, Hancock was placed in charge of the Department of the Missouri. He knew little about the Plains Indians and had no experience with their style of warfare. Hancock initially tried to proceed in the manner, which he had become accustomed and adept at during the Civil War: the assembly and deployment of large scale forces. He was convinced that his reputation and an impressive assemblage troops and firepower would intimidate an enemy he considered to be primitive natives.

In March of 1867, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock was the commander of the Department of the Missouri and the Indians of the South Plains were increasingly disgruntled. His first foray onto the Plains that spring was consistent with his old Civil War practices and had predictably poor results under the new conditions against a very different foe.

**Causes of Indian restlessness:**

* After the Civil War ended, there was large increase in the number of travelers crossing the Plains
* The advance of the railroad deep into the Plains offended many Indians; many of the workers and travelers on it indiscriminately and wastefully shot game for sport, an offensive and wasteful practice in the eyes of the Indians
* Many young warriors found the new streams of travel irresistible targets for raids

**Hancock’s Plan:**

In hope of quelling the Indians discontent, Hancock assembled a force of 1,400 soldiers at Fort Leavenworth for a springtime “show of force.” Hancock believed that a strong demonstration would “awe” the Indians into greater passivity and compliance.

Hancock’s force included eleven troops of the Seventh Cavalry, seven companies of the Thirty-Seventh Infantry, and a battery of the Fourth Artillery. One regiment in the Seventh was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer. Hancock’s first destination was Fort Larned in central Kansas. There the Indian Bureau Agent was able to convince only two chiefs to show up. Annoyed by the small number of Indian chiefs who agreed to meeting, Hancock proceeded to sternly inform the ones who showed up that he would find the other chiefs in their village the next day to give them the same stern war or peace alternatives.

**Indian Responses:**

Not surprisingly, the chiefs who got the blunt lecture were alarmed and those who did not hear it but saw the large Army force headed their way were frightened, went into hiding, or fled in small groups, thereby effectively dispersing the Indian forces.

Hancock interpreted their deserted village on Pawnee Fork as a sign of hostile intent. He directed Custer’s cavalry to cordon or catch the fleeing Indians, but the soldiers were hard pressed to catch up with so many small and fast travel groups. When Custer’s troopers reached the Smokey Hill Road, they found the stage stops and settlements along the route burned and looted. It was not clear whether the fleeing Ogalala Sioux or the Cheyennes were the culprits.

Chasing down numerous small groups of Indians was logistically demanding on the Army. Short of forage for his horses, Custer found his force stuck at Fort Hays. In the interim, despite the advocacy of the Bureau Agents on the behalf of the Indians, Hancock interpreted the recent events as justification to burn the Pawnee Fork village. Lost in the flames were over 250 lodges and substantial camp supplies, whether or not the owners were guilty of anything more than being fearful for their lives.

Throughout May 1867, Hancock continued to deliver his absolutist ultimatum to all chiefs that he was able to round up to listen to it. Upset by the news of the burnt village, the harsh message and the terms of the alternatives, the Sioux and Cheyennes attacked every outpost of progress they could find, including mail stops, stagecoaches, railroaders, and wagon trains. By the end of the summer virtually all modes of regular transport across Kansas and Colorado had ceased.

So complete was the failure of Hancock’s so-called “demonstration of force” that the governors of the afflicted states agitated for the authority to call up the state Volunteers to help the Regular forces.

**Analysis:** Hancock’s “demonstration of force” failed to pacify the Indians with bloodshed because it was poorly linkage to “diplomatic” efforts and more positive and peaceful alternatives for the Indians were unclear or not forthcoming. Furthermore, Hancock failed to understand his enemies or appreciate the role of warfare in native culture.

Hancock was unwilling to change from his old Civil War methods and find tactics that would meet the objective of pacifying the Indians in his department. Because of his failure to take into account the “intelligence” as provided to him by the Indian Agents about the intentions of his potential foes, he completely misunderstood how his actions would be interpreted and reacted to by the Indians.

Instead of pacifying the Indians as was his objective, he incited them to greater violence that resulted in substantial losses to the American interests that he was tasked with protecting.

Furthermore, Hancock and Custer’s conventional heavy army practices were not always suitable for meeting and engaging their dispersed and fleet foes decisively. Time and again, Hancock’s and Custer’s forces wore out their horses or ran out of fodder, while small bands of Indians slipped out of their grasp.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #3: The Peace Initiatives: The Treaties of 1867 and 1868**

**Medicine Lodge Treaty 21-28 October 1867**

**Background:** The Medicine Lodge Treaty of October 1867 was the first one of two related treaties intended to bring some sort of consistent policy and strategy to the handling of relations with the Indians on the Northern and Southern Plains. On July 20, 1867 as the failures of General Hancock’s actions were recently known, an act of Congress created a new Peace Commission that consisted of four civilian members and three military officers with the task to convince the Indians on the Northern and Southern Plains to “concentrate” on two vast “reservations” where they “would no longer threaten the travel routes and settlements.” (Utley, 135-136) Similarly, these lands “reserved” for the Indians would be off-limits to settlers and whites, except for Indian Bureau personnel stationed there to conduct government business with the tribes.

In October 1867, 5,000 Indians gathered at Medicine Lodge Creek, Kansas. Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache Chiefs signed the treaty on the 21st and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Chiefs joined the document a week later, though not without much mistrust because of Hancock’s burning of the Cheyennes’ Pawnee Fork village earlier in the spring.

In addition to agreeing to remain on the stipulated reservations on two vast tracts of Oklahoma (then Indian Territory), the Indians were to receive instruction and agricultural implements so that they might change their ways from nomadic hunting to stable farming.

**Significance:** For the Army, these treaties had the potential to solve their most vexing problem: determining which Indians were hostile and which ones were peaceful. Indians on the reservations were deemed peaceful and those who were off the reservation without a military pass were not.

**Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868**

**Background:** In the Spring of 1868, the Peace Commissioners headed to the Northern Plains to see if a similar treaty agreement could be concluded there. Meeting at Fort Laramie in May, the first draft of the treaty meet Red Cloud’s demand that the Bozeman Trail would be closed and the forts guarding it would be abandoned. The reservations for the Northern Plains Indians were to consist of much of South Dakota and hunting rights along the Republican and Platte Rivers and the Powder River region was deemed “unceeded Indian territory.”

By July 2d, the treaty had been signed by almost 200 Chiefs and representatives, but a few of them including Red Cloud held out – wanting to make sure the forts and trails were indeed vacated. Finally in early November Red Cloud signed.

**Significance:** Unfortunately, ratification of the treaties by Congress was not swift, and the bills for supporting appropriations were even slower and were further hampered by a Congressional twist. In the final version of the bill, Congress determined that the Army, not the Indian Bureau would be in charge distributing the funds and supplies, because the latter organization had a reputation for corruption. The US government’s failure to promptly implement and provide for the terms specified in the treaties soon caused more discontent and gave rise to another outbreak of hostilities.

**Why treaties with the Plains Indians rarely worked?**

**Background:** After a bloody Indian uprising in 1864-1865, Indian Bureau officials crafted a series of treaties with the hostile northern and southern Plains tribes in the Fall of 1865. While the officials who negotiated the treaties believed these documents would restore peace to the Plains, most Army officers were more skeptical. Their doubts were well founded based upon their previous first hand experiences with the difficulty of enforcing such terms between peoples with vastly differing beliefs, perceptions and cultural values.

**Difficulties meeting treaty obligations often stemmed from the following**:

**Indian Difficulties:**

- Chiefs who signed the treaties did not always understand all the terms, especially when significant rights to hunting lands held in perpetuity were being ceded permanently

- Chiefs did not always represent all the bands (smaller family sub-groups) within their tribes; tribal culture continued to grant these sub-groups a high degree of dissent and autonomy to not comply with tribal initiatives they did not agree with.

- Similarly, Chiefs also had little influence over the actions of bellicose young warriors, angry about the threats to their cultural practices and intent on proving their individual worth through heroic warfare against an obliging enemy.

Taken all together, the treaties often placed the Chiefs in the impossible position of being expected to enforce terms which they poorly understood themselves, which their tribesmen understood even less and which called for giving away historic rights intricately tied to cultural values.

**White difficulties**:

- Enduring political consensus on Indian policy was hard to come by in the late 1860’s and early 1870s; Congress often took a long time to ratify treaties and approve appropriations for Indian annuity payments and supplies that the treaties stipulated; Indians often viewed these delays as deceits and reasons to not comply with the treaty terms.

- Settlers, railroad workers, miners, emigrants and others moving on the trails westward often did not know or did not care what was the latest policy for dealing with the Indians; many were covetous of their lands and game, and did not believe that the Indians had any inherent rights to such property; many believed in the doctrine of “manifest destiny” – that eventually all the western lands would be controlled by settlers anyway; many itched to take matters into their own hands especially when provoked by raids and thefts by the Indians.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #4: The Southern Plains Strategy**

**Background:** By Fall 1868, the tribes of the Southern Plains were growing restless. The Cheyenne and Arapahoe peace factions that had signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty became discontented when arms and ammunition were not delivered as promised.

Furthermore, the extension of the railroad through the Smokey Hills of western Kansas towards the Colorado border was drawing intensive settlement to the region and threatened the Indian’s hunting grounds on buffalo ranges of western Kansas. Additionally, certain elements of those tribes never did agree to the terms set at Medicine Lodge and were now poised to join up with discontented Southern Brules, Oglalas, and Northern Cheyenne, who suggested that they might be able to get the settlers out of the Smokey Hills much as they had along the Bozeman Trail. From late summer through the early fall of 1868, these groups attacked all forms of white settlement in the region, plundered goods and stock, and killed seventy-nine settlers.

In early October, the Peace Commission convened again in Chicago to revise the doctrine for dealing with the Indians. Because of the recent attacks, representative arguing for a “peace doctrine” were undermined and the Army’s proposals for a “forceful Indian policy” (Utley, 144) were more favorably received. Some of the more forceful elements of the new policy included abrogation of treaty provisions “permitting the Indians to hunt outside the reservation boundaries and for using military force to compel them to move to their new homes [reservations].” (p. 144) other provisions called for “concentration [on reservations], education, ‘civilization,’ and agricultural self-support.” (Utley, 144)

When interpreted by the Army and articulated by Sherman, the concentration policy became one of “a ‘double process of peace *within* their reservations and war *without.*’” (Utley, 144) Given this mandate, Sherman and Sheridan were able to prosecute a strategy reminiscent of their “hard hand” Civil War practices which they believed were responsible for compelling Southern capitulation.

**Strategy:**

* Three converging columns
* All columns would either find or “drive the Indians into the other columns”
* Disorient, disrupt, destroy Indian villages
* Conduct in the winter time when Indians could not replenish lost resources or move easily
* Make reservation life look more appealing

From the Army’s perspective the best time to pursue such a strategy was in the winter after snow fall when the Indian’s mobility was hampered by a lack of forage for their horses and food for tribal members. At this time the Indian’s willingness to fight was greatly reduced. For the Army, success was predicated upon developing superior combat power complete with the robust supply services required for winter campaigning as the harsh plains weather was an indiscriminate foe. In this regard the Army had much to learn at the cost of many horses and mules. Overall, the strategy was found untenable if the substantial logistic demands of winter campaigning were not carefully considered and met.

By November, Sheridan marshaled a force of more than 800 soldiers replete with an impressive supply train to pursue this new strategy. By the end of that month, the Cheyenne camped in the Washita Valley were the first to experience the devastating results. It did not take long for the other tribes to get the message, that, winter provided no more respite. Neighboring Kiowa quickly understood the implications and petitioned General Hazen for protection as they perceived him to be more conciliatory. As the incident with the Kiowa showed, the problem with this strategy was it made no provision for distinguishing between peaceful Indians and hostile ones and substantial improvements in intelligence capabilities were necessary to insure more incisive application.

**Lessons Learned?:**

Based upon the Southern Plains Campaigns of 1868-1869, Sherman and his subordinate officers became convinced they had discovered three “fundamental truths” of Indian fighting:

* Indians would not hold a position and fight organized forces, they preferred to run regardless of the numbers of forces, Indian or US involved
* Indians never sought to engage US forces unless they were near their villages
* Indian resistance would be nonexistent during the winter when they were too busy with life support activities; for the Indian warfare remained a warm weather activity

Many officers became so convinced of these “truths” and disrespectful of the real capabilities of their foes that they failed to notice that Indian warfare could depart from these supposed doctrines with disastrous results.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #5: The Apache Campaign**

**Background:** At the end of the Civil War, the Army was faced with restoring some order over the virtual anarchy that had prevailed. During the war, the Apaches and Navajos had been stirred-up by the autonomous and heavy-handed efforts of James Henry Carleton, U.S. commander of the Southwest, to corral them on Bosque Redondo. With influx of settlers and fortune seekers to the Southwest following the war, the Apache in particular were inspired to escape from their confinement and resume their depredations on growing stream of newcomers. From their hideouts and *rancheritas* tucked away in the inhospitable terrain, the Apaches believed that they could resist the encroachment. The challenge for the Army was to convince the Apaches of the futility of this recourse, but first the troopers had to reach them, something conventional military practices and campaign methods were inadequate to do.

**Terrain problems**

Numerous terrain problems beset Army forces conducting operations against the Apaches. This region, encompassing Arizona and New Mexico, held some of the most rugged and inhospitable terrain to be found anywhere in the U.S. or her territories. There were rugged high mountains and plateaus, some of which held snow year round such as the Mogollon, the San Francisco Peaks, and Sierra Blanco. Between them were hot rocky deserts and canyons inhabited by numerous poisonous bugs and reptiles and great distances between reliable sources of water. Under the best of conditions travel remained arduous throughout this vast region. So difficult was the going in this country that one officer exclaimed, “I defy any one to make his way over this country without the aid of profanity.” (p. 178)

The logistical implications for the Army were daunting as supplies for Arizona had to shipped from San Francisco and around Baja to Yuma by steamer and then hauled in heavily guarded wagon trains to remote outposts. Supplies for New Mexico had an even longer overland journey from depots in Kansas and Arkansas. So difficult was the terrain and consuming were these efforts, commanders soon realized that if any successes were to be achieved against the Apaches, they lay in reducing their logistic requirements to absolute minimums and mimicking the mobility enjoyed by the native Apaches.

**Why Crook Succeeded**

Fresh from fighting the Paiutes in Oregon, General George Crook believed he had a good idea of what would be required to convince the Apaches they needed to pursue more peaceful ways. He was able to analyze the unique terrain and logistical problems of the area and adapt his tactics accordingly:

- Crook believed in the extensive use of Indian scouts.

- Crook pared his logistic requirements down to absolute minimums. He shed wagon trains in favor of hardier and more mobile mule pack trains which could proceed into the most inhospitable country. Crook even went so far as to set the example when he chose a mule for his personal mount, ignoring the derision of more impractical and fashion conscious officers.

- Crook convinced his soldiers that no terrain or Apache was beyond their reach. Soon the Apaches came to believe it too, and concluded that the reservation alternatives that Crook was offering were more appealing.

In the words of one of one of Crook’s adversaries as he surrendered, and summarized by one Crook’s lieutenants, Crook won the Tonto Basin War:

…General Crook had too many cartridges of copper **(***demasiadas cartouches de cobre).* The had never been afraid of the Americans alone, but now their own people were fighting against them they did not know what to do; they could not go to sleep at night, because the feared to be surrounded before daybreak; they could not hunt – the noise of their guns would attract the troops; they could not live in the valley- there were too many soldiers; they had retreated to the mountain tops, thinking to hide in the snow until the soldiers went home, but the scouts found them out and the soldiers followed them. They wanted to make peace, and to be at terms of good-will with the whites. [[1]](#footnote-1)

**Frontier Wars Analysis #6: Why the Southern Plains revolted prior to Red River**

**Background:** In 1869, the Grant administration pursued a faith-based initiative for the handling of Indian affairs. The Quaker denomination took a strong lead in this and provided several pacifist oriented administrators as Indian agents. Despite regularly drawing rations and treaty goods from Ft. Sill in particular and other forts and agencies spread between north Texas and Nebraska, several tribes, including some Kiowas and Comanches continued to conduct raids on wagon trains and settlers, often going deep into Texas. From the Texans’ perspective, forts such as Sill were not helpful, but a source of frustration because they provided sanctuary and supplies for the raiders. Furthermore, the Texans were restricted from fighting the raiders outside of Texas when they retreated north across the Red River.

This tenuous condition continued until May 1871, when General Sherman conducted an inspection and fact-finding tour of the forts on the Texas frontier. While on his tour, Sherman did not find the damages to be as extreme as the Texans had previously claimed, he did find Indian actions provocative when a wagon train was massacred in a raid on the Salt Creek Prairie, near Jackboro and Ft. Richardson. Strangely enough, a Kiowa named Santana, seeing no need to change his raiding ways, boasted to his pacifist Indian agent of his participation in this action when the came to Ft. Sill to get more supplies to conduct more raids. Even this was too much for the pacifist agent, and he asked the Army to arrest Santana and his accomplices in the raid. A tense confrontation followed with three war chiefs arrested for return to Texas for trial. Despite one accomplice being shot while attempting escape, the other two were sentenced to life terms in prison, on an attempt to cool the inflamed passions or both the Texans and the Kiowas.

This action did not produce the desired result. Instead the Kiowas splintered into two groups, one seeking peace and the other bent on revenge. The Army now was faced with the unenviable ask of pursing determined a bellicose Comanche and Kiowa elements.

This was difficult because they continued to conduct their attacks on Texas frontier settlements from the vast Staked Plains where they were able to draw supplies from traders venturing out illegally from New Mexico.

In late September 1871, Colonel Mackenzie attacked a Comanche village on the north fork of the Red River and took 124 Comanches captive. It was hoped that their detention along with the two chiefs previously sentenced would compel the rest of the Kiowas and Comanches to pursue more peaceful ways. But the Quaker Indian agents found using “prisoners” for leverage unacceptable and pressed for their release. Army leaders such as Sherman, found this “captive holding” more acceptable than some of the more lethal alternatives. Sherman’s fears about freeing the captured Indians soon proved correct. Kiowas and Comanches emboldened by their tribesmen’s releases and desiring revenge, resumed their attacks on Texas settlements.

By the winter of 1873-1874, several factors were inciting the southern Plains Indians to greater discontent and hostilities:

* Four years of the restraints of reservations life and pressures
* Rations they had been promised on the reservation were either inadequate or not delivered at all and were often of an unsuitable or culturally unpalatable type
* They were angered by the wanton wasteful slaughter of the buffalo. Hide and sport hunters brought west by the railroads killed hundreds of thousands of buffalo. They left the meat to rot, a tremendous insult to the Indians who revered the buffalo, valued it as a food source and were starving themselves after the government failed to deliver rations as promised.
* Indian culture still valued warfare and the opportunities it provided for warriors to prove themselves and earn community respect
* Many Indians wanted revenge for earlier losses sustained in engagements with the Army and during other raids on the frontier
* White horse thieves preyed upon Indian herds without punishment like that received by Indian raiders.

(Utley, 219-220)

For the next three years a pattern of Indian raids and military reaction prevailed on the north Texas frontier and Indian Territory. By July 1874, it was clear that pacifist good intentions in the Territory were having no effect on Indian behavior in Texas. A simpler way to determine Indian intentions and complicity in raiding was needed. The Red River War that followed showed that it was easier to identify that line geographically than it was to make assessments about individual Indians.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #7: Why converging columns worked on the Southern Plains and not for Custer?**

Converging columns worked on the Southern Plains and during the Red River campaign several years later because:

* The Indians were often caught by surprise and splintered into smaller groups and forced to flee without their means of sustenance
* The Army was able to use this strategy to advantage in inclement weather and the winter
* Scouts did a good job of finding Indian concentrations for disruption

Converging columns did not work for Custer at Little Big Horn because:

* Custer valued surprise over having fresh accurate intelligence: he believed his force had been spotted and wanted to get a jump on the Indians
* Without accurate fresh intelligence, Custer and his subordinate elements did not know that they were much closer than they believed to the largest Indian encampment to gather in many years, literally underestimated the emery
* Due to terrain challenges, the other columns were too far away to “converge” and relieve Custer’s forces from their overwhelming engagement
* Command Complacency? This strategy had been successful many times before against the Indians, failed to assess what was different about this campaign that might reduce the chances of success

**Frontier Wars Analysis #8: The Modoc War July 1872- May 1873**

**Background:** The Modocs were a west coast tribe that had historically lived on the California – Oregon border. In 1864 the Modocs under the leadership of Kintapuash, also known as “Captain Jack” signed a treaty that ceded their lands and settled them on a reservation with the Klamaths in Oregon. The arrangement was short lived as the two tribes did not get along well and the Modocs were pressured to move off the reservation by the larger Klamath tribe.The Modocs then returned to their old lands which were filling up with white settlers who demanded that the Modocs return to the reservation.

In November 1872, the Indian Superintendent for the region, insensitive to the Modocs problems with the Klamaths, asked the Army for assistance in moving “Captain Jack” and his followers back to the shared reservation. What both the Superintendent and the Army general in charge, BG Canby, failed to realize or account for was the fact that “Captain Jack” and his people were determined to fight as they felt they had no realistic alternative since the Klamaths made reservation life an impossible alternative. Unfortunately, settler pressures for quick resolution over-rode the need for careful handling of a delicate situation and a cavalry troop under Captain James Jackson was sent to find and move the offending Indians from their encampment not far from Tule Lake on the bank of Lost River.

The Modocs mocked the early morning demand for their weapons and return to the reservation and in the tension, shooting began which was later joined by a group of ranchers anxious to see the Indians gone. The Indians split into two groups and retreated to the south side of Tule Lake, killing fourteen settlers along the way. There 60 Modoc warriors holed up in a rugged lava formation whose natural defensive properties they improved. The Army was compelled to call in reinforcements. Efforts to rout t he Modocs with artillery fire were futile and the army settled in for a siege through out the winter. Efforts at peace negotiations throughout the early spring of 1873 were inconclusive, as the Modoc consensus on acceptable terms could not be found.

In April, the Army was once again authorized to resume military pressure and closed in its positions surrounding the Modocs. The Modocs demanded their own reservation on Lost River and amnesty. The Army insisted on full surrender and prisoner of war status. Faced with this increased military pressure, Modoc desperation flared into a treacherous revenge plot to kill the peace emissaries. “Captain Jack” facing a “loss of face” among his people felt forced to go along. At a negotiations meeting between the Modocs and the Army, “Captain Jack” pulled out a pistol and shot Canby in the face, while the other members of the Army negotiating team were shot or stabbed.

The treacherous death of Canby shocked the Army and stirred calls for ruthless suppression of the Modocs. Once again the Army planned for an all-out assault on the Modocs’ lava bed redoubt, which again failed to end the standoff. By May, Modoc resistance was splintering. A small group surrendered to the Army and volunteered to find and bring the rest in, including “Captain Jack,” who was finally captured in the beginning of June.

**Significance:** The sad and prolonged handling of the Modoc resistance, showed that neither the Army nor the Indian bureau possessed either adequate doctrine or policies for insightfully and quickly resolving such insurrections. For the Modocs and the Army, the tragedy was that neither the Army nor the Indian Bureau was willing or able to offer them a more palatable alternative to desperate fight than the impossible living arrangement with the Klamaths.

**Frontier Wars Analysis #9: The Nez Perce - 1877**

If the Modoc War was a prolonged static stalemate, the conflict with the Nez Perce was a dynamic, six-month, 1,700 mile odyssey that sorely taxed the capabilities and available resources of the Army.

**Background:** The Nez Perce rightly believed that they had never ceded their claims to the Wallowa Valley. But by Fall 1876, Oregon settlers succeeded in forcing the government to overturn its previous rulings and seek some way to get the Indians to relinquish their claims to the valley so it could be opened for white settlement. What the Indian Agents and Army officers placed in charge of effecting this action failed to understand was the spiritual significance of the land to the Nez Perces and the extent to which they were willing to go to retain it. Their understanding of this was clouded by the dominance of General Howard in the proceedings and his strong religious convictions which clouded his ability to understand the Indians’ perspective or to seek any other courses of action.

While drawn into negotiations at Ft. Lapwai, Chief Joseph’s band of the Nez Perces learned that their valley had been occupied by the cavalry. Though angry about this tacit pressure, the chiefs agreed to move to the reservation within thirty days. During the thirty day movement period, several young men from the band got drunk and attacked four whites without sanction from the chiefs. This provocation drew out the cavalry and infantry units stationed at Ft. Lapwai.

The Army finally caught up with the Nez Perces at the mouth of White Bird Canyon. Unsteady actions by both sides extinguished any hopes for a negotiated outcome. Drawing the cavalry into the canyon, the Indians inflicted devastating losses on the troopers before they crossed the Salmon River into the mountains beyond.

**Significance:** What ensued for the next four months was a series of engagements in which the Nez Perce fought brilliantly on ground and terms favorable to them, before they disengaged and maneuvered quickly out of Army range. The Army, on the other hand, after each engagement was compelled to call upon more and more soldiers from all posts across the region in an attempt to catch the highly mobile Nez Perces. Nez Perce mobility was enhanced by their lack of reliance on cumbersome wagon or pack trains and their serial raiding, even from the Army forces that were following them, and their ability to live of the land due to the efforts of women and children traveling with the group.**Summary & Analysis: Failures and Successes from the Frontier Wars**

**Failures from:**

**Bozeman Trail - 1866**

- Strong point defenses (i.e. Ft. Phil Kearney, etc.)/defensive posture not suitable to conditions

- Economy of force measures; too few troops, too few supplies, too broad a mission for threat conditions

- Poor leadership; indecisive; unable to articulate and obtain adequate resources; unable to forcefully and clearly convey mission and intent to subordinates; unable to effectively discipline insubordination that filled leadership vacuum

- Lack of accurate and timely intelligence about intentions and locations of hostile elements

**Modoc War – 1872-1873**

- Hostiles not presented with/maneuvered into a more appealing (i.e. “fair”/ reasonable) alternative than entrenched stronghold defensive position; Army compelled to conduct costly, resource intensive, prolonged siege

**Nez Perce – 1877**

- Prejudices and beliefs of certain key Army leaders clouded their ability to recognize opportunities for more favorable negotiated outcomes

- Military leaders overshadowed civil authorities in the Indian Bureau

- Poor understanding/appreciation of Indian grievances, cultural motivations, and capabilities

- Army logistics was still too slow and cumbersome compares to Indian capabilities

- Army tactical and operational leadership cautious and unimaginative

- Army troops of uneven quality and experience; many not used to rigors/requirements of Indian campaigning; militia volunteers undisciplined and unhelpful

- Army leadership plagued by personal/professional disagreements and jealousies

**Successes from:**

**Southern Plains**

* Converging columns were effective at finding Indian concentrations and convincing them resistance was futile and “reservation” alternatives were preferable
* Relied on “hard hand” methods, including the destruction of considerable quantities of Indian horses, lodges and supplies
* Proved that the Army was better able to conduct winter campaigns than were the Indians

**Red River 1874-1875**

* Duplicated and validated the “hard hand” methods applied on the Southern Plains 6-7 years earlier; substantial numbers of Indian horses (i.e. Palo Duro) and lodges were captured and destroyed; Indian encampments constantly sought out for destruction; No refuge for the Indians except on the reservation
* Converging columns were still the major element of this strategy
* Vigorous prosecution convinced Indians of the futility of further resistance
* Carried out into the winter and during cold rain and muddy weather. Army logistics were constantly challenged to meet requirements, though dismal, still performed better than Indian logistics

**Apache Wars**

* Vigorous inspirational leadership recognized the need to adapt methods to extreme terrain conditions of the Southwest; Crook led by example
* Soldiers specially trained and hardened; logistic requirements and trains reduced from wagons to what pack mules could transport, providing greater access to inhospitable terrain where hostiles were hiding out
* Made maximum use of friendly Indian scouts to find hostile Indians
* As on the Southern Plains and during the Red River War, methods employed reached the hostile Indians and convinced them that reservation alternatives were preferable to continued conflict

1. Lt. John G. Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (New York, 1891), 213-214 as cited in Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* ( New York: Macmillan, 1973), 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)