

THE EMERGENCE OF OPERATIONAL ART IN THE GREAT SIOUX WAR 1876-1877

A Monograph

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ABSTRACT

THE EMERGENCE OF OPERATIONAL ART IN THE GREAT SIOUX WAR, by MAJ
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The Sioux War of 1876-1877 was the largest campaign of the late-nineteenth century Indian Wars. This conflict grew out of the desire of the United States Government to resolve confusing territorial claims to the Black Hills and the “unceded territories” of the Powder and Yellowstone River valleys. The numerous and fierce Lakota and their northern Cheyenne allies controlled these areas and drove out rival Indian tribes and the United States Army in the late 1860s, and established dominance in the region. The Division of the Missouri, led by Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, had developed a successful concept to defeat the tribes of the southern plains from 1867 to 1873 that used converging columns, winter expeditions, and attacks against Indian stores and possessions to catch the Indians when they were least mobile. Sheridan’s initial campaign plan against the Lakota and their allies used this same concept, but failed to develop an operational approach that linked tactical actions to the strategic objective. His initial plan used against the Lakota and Cheyenne embraced the tactics of the southern plains in an environment and against a massed enemy for which they were disastrously ill-suited, and resulted in a string of defeats that culminated in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. This defeat provided impetus for the additional resources that Sheridan used to develop an operational approach that turned the war against the Lakota around in the winter and spring campaign of 1876-1877. Sheridan developed a campaign approach that utilized the modern concept of operational art, linking tactical actions in time, space and purpose to achieve a strategic endstate. After Little Big Horn, Sheridan linked his main effort at the Indian reservation agencies to isolate the hostile Lakota from their summer roaming agency Lakota that constituted the preponderance of the Lakota and Cheyenne combat power. In order to make it possible to pacify the Lakota at the agencies, Sheridan coupled those efforts with the establishment of a network of bases in the unceded territories and relentless pursuit of the remaining hostile bands. Sheridan understood that Lakota and Cheyenne culture and military capabilities revolved around their ability to hunt buffalo and raid against their neighboring tribes from horseback with rifles. By taking away these tools and confining the Lakota and Cheyenne on the reservation, Sheridan could successfully extend the Army’s reach into the unceded territories and defeat the smaller hostile bands that remained.

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Introduction

By late 1875, the allied Indian nations of the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne Indians were the most powerful and largest united tribes remaining in the United States. Competing demands for protection, land, and resources convinced the government that it must take action against these tribes.¹ The Sioux fought and won significant victories against the United States Army throughout the 1860s, and lived unfettered in the Great Sioux Reservation and the “unceded territories.”²

The Treaty of 1868 left the Lakota Sioux a substantial reservation that included what is now South Dakota west of the Missouri River and a huge area drained by the Powder and Yellowstone rivers. The treaty referred to these areas as unceded Indian Territory, in which whites were prohibited to settle and the Sioux could hunt so long as the game was sufficient. The conditions of the Treaty of 1868 included withdrawal of the Army from the Powder River forts, and established a precedent for the Army of peace within the reservations and war against the Indians without.³ After driving the Army out of the area during Red Cloud’s War in 1866-1867, the Lakota established dominance over the region by pushing out their neighbors including the Blackfeet, Crow, Assiniboines, Gros Ventres, Pawnee, and Shoshone. The Lakota were at their

¹ In order to avoid confusion and establish common terminology, the general term “Indians” addresses the various tribes in general, consistent with the usage in most primary and secondary source material. The term “Lakota” refers to that branch of the greater Sioux nation (the others being Dakota and Nakota) referred to as the Teton Sioux and including the various sub-tribes: Sans Arcs, Minneconjou, Brule, Two Kettle, Oglala, Hunkpapa, and Blackfeet (not to be confused with the Blackfeet tribe, an enemy of the Sioux). Often, the major branch name is assumed and omitted in usage, for example: Oglala Sioux or Yanktonnais Sioux (Yanktonnais as a sub-tribe of the Dakota Sioux).

² See Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), vii-viii. The “unceded” territories included the modern western halves of North and South Dakota, and the eastern halves of Montana and Wyoming.

³ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 135-9.

military and economic peak as a horse culture living on the still robust buffalo herds of the northern plains. However, the forces of continued white settlement, the strong pressure from settlers to take the Black Hills, and the advance of the Northern Pacific Railroad put pressure on the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne. The Treaty of 1868 created unclear obligations for white settlers and uncertain requirements for the Sioux, and when combined with the other pressures led to conflict by 1875 and the Great Sioux War in 1876.⁴ The spring and summer of 1876 provided tremendous reinforcement to the Lakota dominance during Brigadier General George Crook's defeats at the Powder River and the Rosebud, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's disastrous defeat in June, and Crook's futile chase that ended the summer campaign. Well before 1876, the Lakota developed a reputation for fierceness; the Army recognized their military prowess as preeminent among the Plains tribes. Common wisdom among the Army officer corps tended to dismiss feats of arms against other tribes with the retort, "Wait till you meet the Sioux!"⁵ Robert Utley summed up the situation in late summer 1876 very clearly:

Never before or after were the northern Plains tribes better prepared for war. They were numerous, united, confident, superbly led, emotionally charged to defend their homeland and freedom, and able, through design or good fortune, to catch their adversary in unfavorable tactical situations. Even flawless generalship might not have prevailed over Sitting Bull's mighty coalition that summer. In large part the generals lost the war because the Indians won it.⁶

Civil War and Indians Wars experience dominated the Army's approach to Indian fighting during this period. Utley points out that neither the Military Academy, nor any of the much later service schools taught Indian warfare at this time and there was little institutional

⁴ Ibid., 242-248.

⁵ George W. Baird, *A Report to the Citizens, Concerning Certain Late Disturbances on the Western Frontier Involving Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Chief Joseph and Geronimo Opposed in the Field by Forces Under the Command of General Nelson A. ("Bear-Coat") Miles* (Ashland, KY: Lewis Osborne, 1972 [1896]), 26.

⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 262.

instruction available.⁷ Contrary to popular perceptions, while not formally educated on Indian warfare or guided by doctrine, the officer leadership was highly professional and experienced. Historian Paul Hedren points out that every officer of field grade and above in the 1876 campaign had previously served in the Civil War, and nearly all had won brevets for exemplary performance. Approximately sixty percent of the officers had been educated at the United States Military Academy, and the vast majority of all company grade officers in the campaign had previous experience in the Indian Wars, though not all against the Sioux.⁸ The Civil War service of its two senior leaders, Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, Commander of the Division of the Missouri, and General of the Army William Sherman included the legacy of punitive “hard war” against the south, and they had no qualms about justifying its use against the Indians. Sheridan, Crook, Colonel Nelson Miles of Fifth Infantry Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Elwell Otis of Twenty-second Infantry Regiment, Colonel Wesley Merritt of Fifth Cavalry Regiment, and Colonel Ranald Mackenzie of Fourth Cavalry Regiment shared common campaign experience on the southern plains in the five years previous to the Sioux War. Brigadier General Alfred Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, had served on the peace commissions with the Sioux after the Civil War from 1867 to 1868. Most shared ideas came through practice and word of mouth, and evolved to include prominent features including converging columns, wintertime campaigns, and punitive attacks. The dominant concern was to catch the Indians before they became mobile and moved too fast for the Army to catch them in the summer. Instead, the Army

⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 44-45.

⁸ Paul L. Hedren, *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle* (Norman: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2011), 40-48. Hedren provides biographical sketches of nearly every general and field grade officer. In conversation and common usage, officers referred to one another by their highest brevet rank, hence the proliferation of the use of “General” in contemporary works. For simplicity, officers’ actual ranks are used.

sought to deprive them of the means to live outside of the reservation by destroying lodging, food and clothing stores, and weary the various tribes of further resistance.

The strategic context for the Great Sioux War from General Philip Sheridan's perspective developed from the pressures on the government related to westward settlement, and hostile aggression by the Lakota against their neighbors and settlers. Foremost, it revolved around the ability of the United States government to gain control of the unceded territory and the Black Hills for settlement, exploitation of its resources, and the passage of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Sheridan perceived his overall military objective as the development of conditions for the United States to take this control from the Sioux, end the resistance of the Sioux against white settlers and other Indian tribes, and confine the Sioux to the reservations.

Sheridan derived his subordinate operational objectives from his experience in the Indian wars, as well as these strategic imperatives. While Sheridan agreed with the reservation policies of the government, and ruthlessly enforced them, he empathized with the Indians' resistance to white settlement, and believed that poor management of the reservation system and Indian policy led to and exacerbated conflict throughout the Indian wars.⁹ Sheridan sought to force the non-compliant and hostile Lakota and Cheyenne back to the reservations and to defeat and punish the Lakota sufficiently to subjugate them and convince their leadership that further resistance was useless. Until the Custer defeat, he envisioned a campaign of converging columns that would be able to catch the hostile bands and punish them enough to elicit compliance.

Based on the results of the campaign up to mid-September 1876, Lieutenant General Sheridan and his department commanders executed a simplistic operational approach based on their previous experience that led to disaster and futility against the Sioux. By any objective measure, the Lakota and Cheyenne in spring and summer of 1876 decisively defeated, frustrated,

⁹ Paul A. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 181-185.

and wore down the Army at the Powder River fight in March, the Battle of the Rosebud in mid-June, and the Battle of the Little Big Horn a week later. While Crook claimed victory at Slim Buttes, the Lakota had worn down and played out Crook's column on its' "horse meat march" by calculated design throughout late August and September. The involved department level leadership assumed that the Army would need to start over in 1877 with a new campaign of major operations. Instead, by June 1877, the Army defeated the Lakota soundly, with all hostile leaders confined on the reservation or in self-imposed exile in Canada.

Counter-intuitively, the setbacks that culminated at Little Big Horn proved critical for Sheridan to get the resources he wanted. He articulated a complete and effective design only after the Little Big Horn and other defeats showed the futility of attempting to conquer the powerful Lakota without creating any other conditions for success, or tying the tactical actions of converging columns to an operational objective. Sheridan's successful vision for the campaign used a more modern operational design from late 1876 to summer 1877 that could be described as operational art in modern doctrinal terminology. United States Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, states that operational art for Army forces is, "the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose."¹⁰ Without the development of his approach beyond the basic concept of converging columns and winter campaigns, many of Sheridan's subordinate commanders expected the war against the Lakota and their allies would continue for several more years.

Sheridan's campaign approach after the defeat at Little Big Horn brought together a series of actions linked by common purpose that accomplished his objective of making the unceded territories in Montana, Wyoming, and Dakota Territories safe for settlement and setting conditions for the government to seize control of the Black Hills. He demonstrated extensive

¹⁰ Department of the Army, *Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 3-0, Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 9.

implicit knowledge of his enemy's culture and the application of his own "hard war" techniques throughout the campaign. Sheridan used the establishment of cantonments, forts, and camps in the Powder River and Yellowstone River valleys to project power into the formerly unceded areas. These bases provided staging areas for supply and represented the primary way to extend the reach of his forces, which Sheridan and his commanders found lacking throughout the initial phases of the campaign. The most important forts included two in the Yellowstone Valley at Tongue River and the Bighorn River, the Glendive Cantonment, and Fort Reno.¹¹ Critically, Sheridan linked these projection capabilities to a policy of confiscating firearms and horses of the Lakota and Cheyenne at the agencies of the Indian Bureau within the reservations. Sheridan pushed his subordinates to continue operations into the winter months in order to persistently wear down the hostiles and coerce them to submit to the reservation and the disarming and dismounting program. These actions, combined with the use of diplomacy by Crook and Miles, demonstrated elements of operational art embedded in Sheridan's overall design. His application of hard war principles, combined with sufficient cultural understanding of the Lakota and Cheyenne, concluded the major campaign in the spring of 1877.

Sheridan's campaign design after July 1876 resulted in a series of clear and distinct tactical actions that achieved its strategic objectives. The relentless pursuit in the late fall of 1876 and winter of 1877 included direct combat against the hostiles, and resulted in decisive victories at Cedar Creek, the Dull Knife Fight, Ash Creek, and Wolf Mountain. The new bases in the Powder River and Yellowstone River valleys established Army control of the area. As a result, all Lakota and Cheyenne bands surrendered to the reservation system or sought refuge in Canada. While Sitting Bull had not surrendered, the Lakota could no longer hunt and raid unfettered. The Lame Deer Fight in May 1877 was the last major combat of the campaign, and by the fall of 1877

¹¹ The Army closed Fort Fetterman and Fort Pease in 1868 as part of the Treaty of 1868's conditions of its withdrawal from the Bozeman Trail.

all remaining Lakota and Cheyenne in the United States had surrendered to the Army at the agencies. Sheridan did not seek to control the reservation agencies for the sake of control or to prevent Indian Bureau corruption. Instead, Sheridan used this control to institute his policy to confiscate all horses and firearms. In this way, the Army took away the primary implements of the Lakota and Cheyenne horse culture. The Army thus drove a wedge between those that lived on the reservation in the winter and the core of hostile non-agency Lakota and Cheyenne who roamed the unceded territory year round. The summer roaming agency Lakota and Cheyenne provided the preponderance of the fighting strength that the Army faced in the summer of 1876.

Most material written about the Sioux War in 1876 and 1877 focuses on the Battle of the Little Big Horn and the events leading up to the battle, but material covering the course of the campaign after that battle is far more rare. No works appear to address how Sheridan turned the campaign around from the defeat at the Little Big Horn and defeated the vast majority of well armed and victorious Lakota and Cheyenne still off the reservation by the summer of 1877.

Robert Utley's *Frontier Regulars*, John S. Gray's *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876*, Paul Hutton's *Phil Sheridan and His Army* and the works of National Parks historians Paul Hedren and Jerome Greene are the most prominent and widely respected works on the Sioux War.¹² All of these works focus on the role of the great number of reinforcements sent to the area in fighting the Lakota and Cheyenne as well as the establishment of the posts in the Yellowstone River valley as a means to maintain pressure on the remaining hostile bands throughout the winter. However, none of these works emphasize that the preponderance of reinforcements went to control the reservations, and explain how Sheridan tied this control of the

¹² John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); Jerome Greene, *Morning Star Dawn: The Powder River Expedition and the Northern Cheyenne, 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Jerome Greene, *Slim Buttes, 1876* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Jerome Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

reservations to the active expeditions. Popular culture seems to view the subjugation of the Lakota as an inevitable product of extermination efforts against the Indians, despite the small number of Lakota and Cheyenne killed. In the aftermath of the Battle of Little Big Horn, the outcome of the campaign in the next twelve months must have been completely in doubt to the leadership of the Division of the Missouri.¹³

Strategic and Operational Setting

The strategic setting for the Great Sioux War in 1876-1877 stemmed from the convergence of a conflicted legal system for regulating Indian affairs, western expansion into resource rich areas from the Black Hills to the Big Horn Mountains, and the cultural manifestations of the Lakota as the most powerful Indian nation of the northern plains. The Treaty of 1868 was violated and misunderstood widely by Indians and settlers alike. The frontier Army, commanded on the northern plains by Sheridan, found itself by 1875 unable to meet its obligations to protect settlers and the railroad, secure the Indian Bureau's agencies on the reservations, obey treaty requirements to stop settlers moving to the Black Hills, and protect other tribes from attacks by the Lakotas and their allies. When the Army failed in any of these tasks, the press, the Interior Department, eastern humanitarians, and other citizens took the Army to task. For their part, the Lakota saw threats to their lands, but not enough to alter their cultural imperatives as an akacita culture to hunt and fight. From their perspective, the reservation system existed to provide tribute from the government and a secure base for the winter, from which they could strike out to hunt and fight in the warmer months. When Sheridan received clear strategic guidance to resolve these nagging issues, he was immediately concerned about getting his forces into the field quickly and his ability to catch the Lakota in the winter.

¹³ For an example of recent popular culture references that express the idea of a collective extermination effort against the Sioux, see Alexandra Fuller, "In the Shadow of Wounded Knee," *National Geographic Magazine*, August 2012, 31-67.

The flawed legal system of tribes, borders, and treaty oversight from the government in 1875 was a key factor that led to conflict. For the United States in 1875, the various Indian tribes were domestic dependent nations subject to federal law, but not state law.¹⁴ Prior to the Treaties of 1868, the various Indian tribes west of the Mississippi had no fixed boundaries for their territory. These treaties effectively established two great reservations in what is modern day Oklahoma and South Dakota.¹⁵ Westward-moving settlers increasingly ignored these borders after the Civil War in the pursuit of the agricultural and mineral resources of the west. Within the Army, the laws concerning which department had responsibility for execution of Indian policy led to considerable angst. After the Civil War, Congress gave the Department of the Interior control of the reservations from the War Department, but public law did not enumerate responsibility for the tribes outside the reservation. Most Army officers resented the Interior Department's management of the reservations, and took it as a matter of gospel that the Indian agents were corrupt, and that flawed management caused most problems between Indians and whites. In an effort to clarify the relationship, General Sherman established an Army policy of taking responsibility for the Indians outside the reservation. This policy naturally caused a great deal of confusion for the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne when they hunted in the unceded areas away from the reservation and were attacked by the Army.¹⁶

The existence of these unceded territories outside of the reservations, agreed to in the Treaty of 1868, greatly complicated the problems the Army had in securing the large land area of

¹⁴ General Conference of Western Attorneys, *American Indian Law Deskbook (4th Edition)* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009), 1-5.

¹⁵ Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy 1865-1903* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 122.

¹⁶ George W. Manypenny, *Our Indian Wards* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972 [1880]), 295-6. Manypenny was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs prior to the Civil War and remained active in the leadership of the Interior Department after the war as an outspoken critic of the Army on the frontier.

the frontier. In the treaty, these unceded territories were for Indian use; settlers were permitted to transit, but not to settle. Several tribes, including the Lakota, gravitated to these areas as their preferred hunting areas due to abundant buffalo and other game. This in turn led to problems for the Army in the area to protect railroad construction, prospectors and settlers moving throughout the area when the Lakota and other Indian tribes attacked. By removing the Bozeman Trail forts, the Treaty of 1868 limited the Army's ability to reach into the Great Sioux Reservation and the uncaded areas. Sheridan considered the reservation system sound in principle to separate whites and Indians, but not supportable by the Army. The two largest Lakota agencies were located off the reservation in Nebraska and far away from the navigable waterways favored for cheap transportation. He wanted the agencies and in turn, the Army posts required to secure them, moved back into the Great Sioux Reservation along the Missouri River in order to ease logistical support.¹⁷ By extension, the lack of posts and forces in and around the Great Sioux Reservation also limited the Army's ability to prevent settlers and prospectors from moving through these areas or going to the Black Hills. The potential for conflict was apparent to both sides.¹⁸

Even after the Indian Bureau took control of the agencies, it required the presence of the Army at the agencies for security reasons. The Indian Bureau often objected to a post adjacent to an agency because it exacerbated hostile actions by the Indians, and forced the Army to abandon it, or the Bureau would move the agency. In either case, security concerns from the local Indian agent and the Army then required the Army to build a new post to provide sufficient security, creating a vicious cycle. This occurred between 1867 and 1875 at Spotted Tail Agency and Red Cloud Agency (Fort Laramie, Fort Sheridan, and Camp Robinson), and Standing Rock Agency (Fort Rice and Fort Yates). Both Sheridan and the Indian Bureau decried this practice as wasteful

¹⁷ Hutton, 282.

¹⁸ John Gibbon, *Gibbon on the Sioux Campaign of 1876* (Bellevue, NE: The Old Army Press, 1970), 61.

and each side blamed the other, but the bureau had no other way to enforce order at the agencies and reservations.¹⁹ The Army found itself in the middle of the issue.

The popular desire to take the Black Hills from the Sioux provided both a justification for war and a dilemma for Sheridan. Rumors of gold and other riches attracted huge numbers of illegal settlers and prospectors to the Black Hills. Sheridan and his department commanders felt they were forced by popular recrimination to balance their obligations to prevent settlers from entering the Black Hills with a need to protect settlers wherever they were. This duty absorbed a disproportionately large amount of units, and was nearly impossible to conduct effectively due to the great distances involved.²⁰ Sheridan expressed this dilemma by writing to Sherman in late 1875, "In the Department[s] of Dakota [and Platte] the military have had the double duty of protecting the settlements from the raids of hostile Indians, and the Black Hills country from occupation by miners attracted there by real or imaginary mineral wealth in the soil." He closed the message with a plea for help that would become a strategic imperative, "I earnestly recommend some action which will settle this Black Hills question, and relieve us from an exceedingly disagreeable and embarrassing duty."²¹

Lakota depredation of other tribes and their indifferent attitude toward the reservation system also caused problems. Reports of Lakota attacks on whites and other Indian tribes to Sheridan and Army leadership at all levels, however exaggerated, were rampant throughout Montana, Dakota, and Wyoming territories and the state of Nebraska. The reservations were

¹⁹ Manypenny, 363. Manypenny quotes Sheridan's annual report to Sherman and describes the Indian Bureau position. Fort Laramie was located northwest of modern day Torrington, Wyoming; Fort Sheridan at what is now Chadron, Nebraska, Camp Robinson near modern day Crawford, Nebraska, and Fort Yates and Fort Rice in North Dakota on the Missouri River between modern day Mobridge, South Dakota and Bismarck, North Dakota.

²⁰ Hutton, 293-4; Hedren, *Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 55.

²¹ Phillip H. Sheridan, *Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians Within the Military Division of the Missouri* (Bellevue, NE: The Old Army Press, 1969), 48.

often chaotic. Indian Agents held no real power but control over rations at the agencies. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail exerted real control in the Nebraska agencies, and this helped preserve the Lakota cultural, political, social and religious structure. The Indian Agents recognized the latent hostile attitude of the Lakota on the reservation in the 1870s. One of the most dominant personalities in the Indian Bureau, Agent V. T. McGillicuddy, stated that Lakota considered themselves superior to the white man, who "is a laborer and pays tribute to the Sioux Nation by sending . . . rations and supplies of all kinds."²² The Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies often became violent due to hostile bands. Demanding additional rations, the Oglala killed the chief clerk and two soldiers at Red Cloud Agency, including an officer, in February 1874. At Spotted Tail agency, Minneconjou leaders took control of the beef ration and threatened the agent.²³

This chaotic state provided opportunity for the Lakota and created additional demands for protection. Many Lakota and Cheyenne took advantage of the reservation in the winter for support, but then ventured throughout Montana and Wyoming territory to hunt and raid against whites and other tribes, which in turn required Army protection. The Crow especially suffered along with most of the other tribes of the northern Missouri basin at their smaller reservations.²⁴ Railroad survey duty in the Department of the Dakota in 1873 was substantial and dangerous enough to warrant a large escort detail of over 1,451 men under the command of Colonel David S. Stanley. It included eight companies of the Seventh Cavalry, twenty companies of infantry, and a massive logistics element.²⁵ These burdens and the public clamor for the Black Hills drove the Grant administration to seek a solution through conquest of the Lakota and their allies.

²² Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 24.

²³ Hutton, 287.

²⁴ Jerome A. Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 6.

²⁵ Hedren, *Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 172.

By the fall of 1875, the Grant administration was prepared to deal with the Sioux. Grant held two meetings on 3 and 9 November 1875 that included the Secretaries of War and the Interior, along with Generals Sherman, Sheridan, and Crook. During the first meeting, the administration decided to withdraw troops from Black Hills duty and to force the hostile bands of Lakota and Cheyenne out of the unceded territory and onto the reservation. In the second meeting, the Indian Bureau provided justification and the recommendation to “whip” the Sioux into submission. Indian Bureau agent E. C. Watkins provided the final justification:

The United States troops are held in contempt, and surrounded by their native mountains, relying on their knowledge of the country and powerful endurance, they [the Sioux] laugh at the futile efforts that have thus far been made to subjugate them, and scorn the idea of white civilization. They are lofty and independent in their attitude and language toward the government officials, as well as the whites generally, and claim to be the sovereign rulers of the land. They say they own the wood, the water, the ground, the air, and that white men live in or pass through their country but by their sufferance.²⁶

General Sheridan discerned his strategic guidance directly from these meetings in November 1875 in Washington D.C., but also from his personal experience and significant supported factors. The first of these ends was to pacify the Lakota and Cheyenne and prevent them from attacking their Indian neighbors and white settlers. Sheridan recorded that the report by the Indian Bureau inspector E. C. Watkins of the depredations of the Shoshones, Mandans, Arikaras, Crow and others by the Lakota and Cheyenne was one of the primary justification for military action.²⁷ Sheridan and the department commanders were relieved that their dilemma over protection of the Black Hills and of the settlers was resolved, even though military action supported a land grab of the Black Hills counter to treaty obligations. This represented the second strategic end: to set conditions for the government’s seizure of the Black Hills and reduction of the reservation to open the area from the Black Hills to the Big Horn for settlement.

²⁶ Manypenny, 301-302. Manypenny quotes Watkins inflammatory 9 November 1875 report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

²⁷ Sheridan, *Record of Engagements*, 49.

In August 1875, the Allison Commission had offered the various Lakota tribes six million dollars for the Black Hills, Red Cloud orchestrated a show of violence rejecting the offer and broke up the talks forcefully.²⁸ These strategic objectives were clear in the mind of Sheridan, having developed over the three years prior, and with explicit direction from the administration.

Grant approved military action in the event of Lakota non-compliance and on 6 December, the Indian Bureau issued instructions for the Lakota and Cheyenne to report to the reservations by 31 January 1876.²⁹ Based on the timing of the notification, Sheridan was immediately concerned about the speed with which he could put forces in the field against the Lakota and Cheyenne. He showed immediate concern for his forces to be able to use the winter weather to catch the Indians when they were least mobile. Sheridan recognized the surety of conflict when he wrote Sherman, “The matter of notifying the Indians to come in is perhaps well to put on paper, but it will in all probability be regarded as a good joke by the Indians.” He urged expediency to Sherman, “If it is intended that the Military should operate against these Indians I may safely say that every possibility of success will vanish unless directions are immediately given. ...[U]nless they are caught before early spring, they cannot be caught at all. Gens Terry & Crook should be notified one way or the other without delay.”³⁰

On 7 February 1876, the Interior Department officially turned the matter over to the War Department, effectively authorizing military action against the Lakota and Cheyenne. Sheridan immediately sent a warning to Generals Terry and Crook the next day with minimal initial guidance based on the recommendation of the Secretary of the Interior that they, “take such steps

²⁸ Bailey, 116-8.

²⁹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 247.

³⁰ National Archives, “Special Files of the Division of the Missouri,” Letter from Commission of Indian affairs to the Secretary of the Interior with endorsement by Sheridan and Sherman, 21 January 1876, RG 393. The letter contains both quotations, with Sheridan’s in his endorsement.

with the forces under your command as will carry out the wishes and orders” of the Interior Department.³¹ While Sheridan’s mind was clear in regard to strategic ends to resolve the issues creating conflict on the frontier, he did not develop supporting operational objectives and only a vague operational approach to achieve these ends.

The Absence of Operational Objectives

Sheridan’s clearly defined strategic ends did not translate into well developed operational objectives. Instead of operational objectives, Sheridan developed a deliberately vague operational concept using lines of operation based on the contemporary concept of converging columns. His military objectives for the campaign were limited to directing his department commanders to carry out the requirements of the Secretary of the Interior, and force Sitting Bull’s band to conform to the Interior Department’s directive to return to the reservation. Prior to the defeat at the Little Big Horn battle in June 1876, he fixated on speed and previously successful methods, such as that of converging columns used to overcome the difficulties of the tribes of the southern plains. These methods ignored the realities of the northern plains. He sought to overwhelm the Lakota and Cheyenne with three large columns during the winter months when they were weaker and less mobile, and then defeat them in one large, decisive battle. While effective in the southern plains, this tactic did not account for the harsh arctic conditions of the northern plains and greater distances required. When the weather did permit movement, Sheridan remained committed to his concept and his faulty assumption that each of the three columns had sufficient fighting strength to defeat the Lakota by itself.

³¹ National Archives, “Letters Received by Headquarters Department of the Platte,” Letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the Secretary of War, 1 February 1876, RG 393. See also National Archives, “Letters Received by Headquarters Department of Dakota,” RG 393, with Sheridan’s guidance to Terry. The same letter went to each department commander.

Sheridan's first concern was to get the campaign forces moving as quickly as possible in order to take advantage of the winter weather. He did not establish operational objectives and only limited tactical guidance. His overriding concern was the ability to catch the Lakota and prevent them from escaping. Sheridan's initial instructions to the department commanders provided only that General Crook would operate from the south from his department starting near Fort Fetterman and in the direction of the Powder River, Pumpkin Buttes, and then to the Tongue, Rosebud, and Big Horn Rivers in order to catch Crazy Horse and his allies. General Terry and Lieutenant Colonel Custer would start from Fort Lincoln moving west to the Yellowstone River and follow that to the mouths of the Tongue, Rosebud and Big Horn rivers. Colonel John Gibbon with a third column from Forts Shaw and Ellis, Montana Territory, were to move east to the Yellowstone valley and effectively trap the hostiles between the three separate columns.³²

Sheridan avoided specificity in describing his operational guidance, simply passing on the objective as described by the Secretary of the Interior. The Secretary of the Interior, when turning the matter over to the War Department, stated that hostile Sioux "must come in ... to one of the Sioux Agencies before [January] 31st last, prepared to remain in peace near the agency, or ... be turned over to the War Department and the Army, directed to compel [them] to comply with the orders of this Department." The Secretary of the Interior continued that since Sitting Bull refused to comply, "the said Indians are hereby turned over to the war department for such action on the part of the Army as you may deem proper under the circumstances."³³ Sheridan in turn told Terry and Crook, "All Department lines will be disregarded by the troops until the object requested by the Secretary of the Interior is attained," and that, "You are there for ordered to take

³² Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1876* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876), 441; from Sherman's annual report. See also Sheridan, *Record of Engagements*, 50.

³³ "Letters Received, Department of the Platte," letter, Secretary of the Interior to the Secretary of War, 1 February 1876,

such steps with the forces under your command as will carry out the wishes and orders above alluded to.” To Terry he wrote, with an identical comment to Crook, “operations under your direction and those under General Crook should be made without concert, but if you and he can come to any understanding about concerted movement, there will be no objection from me.”³⁴ He articulated no further operational objectives. On the following day, Sheridan responded to Terry’s request for more specific guidance, and stated, “Your telegram of Eighth received. I have not specific instructions to give you about the Indian hostilities.”³⁵ Sheridan envisioned this to be a decisive stroke and left any other coordination between Crook and Terry up to them.

Converging columns were a common operational approach developed by the Army on the frontier, and were dominant until the summer of 1876. This approach became prominent in the 1850s and 1860s against the plains Indians, reaching its greatest success in the Red River War in 1874. During the Civil War, Brigadier Generals Alfred Sully and Henry Sibley had travelled over the very long distances of the northern plains in converging, but uncoordinated columns with insufficient supplies, and the Lakota and Cheyenne ran them out of the Black Hills and Powder River country. Without fully grasping these lessons, Sheridan's approach for the Sioux War came instead directly from the Red River War in which he was involved. It included converging columns, relentless pursuit, destruction of personal possessions (including ponies), unconditional surrender, and the subsequent incarceration of prominent chiefs. In the context of modern doctrinal terms of operational design, these roughly correspond with lines of operation, arranging operations, centers of gravity, the use of military end state, and effects. This approach represented Sheridan’s version of “hard war” methods against the Indians. Sheridan felt that the model used in the Red River War was the "most successful of any Indian campaign in this

³⁴ Ibid. Sheridan’s statement comes from his endorsement to the reply of the Secretary of the Interior, dated 8 February 1876.

³⁵ “Special Files,” telegram, Sheridan to Terry, 9 February 1876.

country since its settlement by the whites."³⁶ It was not all success. The difficult problems of logistics in the Red River War became insurmountable on the harsher northern plains.³⁷

Generals Crook and Terry understood what Sheridan intended in his concept. Giving wide latitude to Crook and Terry, Sheridan left the actual organization and tactical approach of the expedition to his department commanders, telling Sherman, "I have given no instruction to Gens. Crook or Terry, as I think it would be unwise to make any combination in such a country as they will have to operate in." Sheridan considered each column sufficiently strong to take care of itself, and assumed no concentration of Indians could stay together long enough to present a threat to the columns. Sherman approved the plan, but counseled Sheridan to stay close to the headquarters if troubles started in the Department of the Gulf with reconstruction, and to leave the last of the Sioux business to Terry and Crook.³⁸ General Terry understood that the division commander wanted him to trap the Lakota and Cheyenne between himself and Crook. In late February, he cabled Sheridan that he intended for Colonel Gibbon and Lieutenant Colonel Custer to commence their march on the Yellowstone River valley on 1 April with all force available to press between their forces the one large Lakota encampment then located on the Little Missouri River. Terry's forces would also prevent the Lakota from moving north of the Yellowstone River, "If Colonel Custer can get to [the] northward of the Indians I think that he and Gibbon together will probably be able to throw them to the southward to meet the troops of General Crook."³⁹ The effectiveness of the converging columns rested on the assumption that each

³⁶ Hedren, *Sioux War Order of Battle*, 36-8.

³⁷ Hutton, 327.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁹ "Letters Received, Department of Platte," letter, Terry to Sheridan, 25 February 1876.

column was sufficiently strong to avoid defeat. Events at the Rosebud and at the Little Big Horn proved this assumption was not valid and rendered the use of converging columns disastrous.

Sheridan desired a winter campaign due to the overwhelming concern to catch the hostiles before they became more mobile in the spring, but could not overcome the winter weather in 1876 until late May. Terry's note shows that he shared Sheridan's concern that the Lakota and Cheyenne not escape, and that he shared Sheridan's lack of detail in his plans. Terry's plan as he described it does not explain the relationship between the columns in his department, any details of timing with Crook, or what he would do as a follow on action.

Terry did not depart Fort Lincoln at all in the winter. As soldiers assembled from various posts at Fort Lincoln, weather, frostbite and other injuries delayed them. Terry assessed the snow too deep to travel and preferred to wait until the road cleared in the spring thaw.⁴⁰ Sheridan did not apply pressure on Terry to start the expedition, and gave him a way out soon after he gave Terry authorization to attack the Lakota and Cheyenne, "If Sitting Bull is not on the Little Missouri as heretofore-supposed to be, and cannot be reached by a quick march, as you formerly contemplated, I am afraid but little can be done by you at the present time." Sheridan tactfully deferred to Terry's position as the local commander, "I am not well enough acquainted with the character of the winters and early springs in your latitude to give any directions, and you will have to use your own judgment as to what you may be able to accomplish at the present time or early spring."⁴¹

As it unfolded, the winter weather prevented any progress by General Terry's columns. Colonel Gibbon's Montana column started out on 17 March with six companies of Seventh Infantry, four companies of Second Cavalry, and twenty-five Crow Indian scouts. Arriving at

⁴⁰ Bailey, 126-7.

⁴¹ "Special Files," telegram from Sheridan to Terry, 9 February 1876.

Fort Ellis in waist deep snow, Gibbon learned that Terry would not be able to start until May and decided to wait at Fort Ellis until Terry's Dakota column could move.⁴²

General Crook departed Fort Fetterman in late February with five companies of Second Cavalry, five companies of Third Cavalry, and two companies of Fourth Infantry and fought through fierce weather before he encountered 105 Cheyenne lodges near the mouth of the Little Powder River. Crook's column was the only one to make contact with any hostile non-agency Indians. With Crook along nominally as an observer, the column, led by Colonel Joseph Reynolds of the 3rd Cavalry, attacked the Cheyenne village on 17 March in at the Battle of Powder River in minus forty-degree Fahrenheit temperatures. After an initially successful attack, Reynolds lost control of the village and their pony herd when the Cheyenne counterattacked. Without sufficient supplies to stay in the field or pursue the Cheyenne, the expedition returned to Fort Fetterman. Reynolds appeared to be a failure and received a court-martial. His failure marked the end of the winter campaign. From Sheridan's perspective, "The affair is shamefully disgraceful."⁴³

Throughout the first half of 1876, the dominating concern for Sheridan and his subordinates was to catch the Lakota and Cheyenne with an assumption of battlefield superiority. One of Gibbon's scouts, Thomas H. LaForge, described the mentality of the senior commanders in the spring and summer of 1876, "All commanders in this campaign were hurrying. They were afraid the Sioux might get away." In one of the great ironies of the campaign, most of the civilian and Indian scouts found it amusing that a massive Indian gathering with 800 or more lodges with families, property and pony herds in tow could move quickly enough to avoid cavalry.⁴⁴ When

⁴² Hutton, 302-3.

⁴³ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁴ Roger Darling, *A Sad and Terrible Blunder* (Vienna, VA: Potomac-Western Press, 1990), 70.

Terry could finally move in the spring, he expressed concern to Sheridan over the delays by Crook on 16 May. Sheridan remained convinced of the Army's inherent fighting superiority and of the danger of the Lakota and Cheyenne getting away, rebuking Terry that, "[Y]ou must rely on the ability of your own column for your best success. I believe it to be fully equal to all the Sioux which can be brought against it, and only hope they will hold fast to meet it."⁴⁵ This comment in May 1876 indicated his commitment in the summer campaign to his original concept from the winter, and foreshadowed his failure to account for the greater numbers and military prowess of the Lakota and their allies. They chiefly worried about the ability to bring the Indians to battle, instead of how to fight the battle, what they would do after the battle, or how a victory over the Lakota and Cheyenne would bring them into compliance at the reservation.

Failure in the Summer Campaign

The inability to mount a conclusive winter campaign in 1876 forced Sheridan to continue the campaign into the late spring and summer. The campaign scheme of converging columns developed from successful practice in the Red River War in 1874 did not translate into success in 1876. The Lakota and northern Cheyenne represented a more difficult enemy than encountered on the plains in the past. The larger area of the unceded territories, and the solidarity against the Army shown by the Lakota refusal to provide Crook with scouts, led the Army to poor local intelligence on the dispersion of the various bands. While Sheridan recognized that the non-agency Lakota received significant reinforcements of fighting strength from the summer-roaming agency Lakota, he maintained an assumption of fighting superiority of the Army over any Indian force. When combined with the overwhelming anxiety to catch and prevent the Indian camps from escaping, this assumption of fighting strength was disastrous at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Crook's fight at the Battle of the Rosebud foreshadowed the Little Big Horn when Crook's

⁴⁵ "Special Files," telegram, Sheridan to Terry, 16 May 1876.

overconfidence in the strength of his fighting force left him unprepared and tactically surprised. The ill-defined nature of the campaign plan left Crook to his own decision to retreat to his Goose Creek camp, in effect removing pressure on the huge Lakota and Cheyenne village on the Little Big Horn River. Crook's retreat to Goose Creek disconnected him completely from the actions of Terry's column. In turn, Terry's column derived no benefit from the effects of Crook's pressure from the south, and resulted in Custer charging into the huge camp on the Little Big Horn entirely unprepared for it and with no conditions set for his success. Terry, himself disconnected and with a disaster to deal with, could not immediately pursue the huge Lakota and Cheyenne village and attempt to recover a victory from the earlier defeats. To Sheridan, these disasters lent clarity and support from Congress needed to develop an effective campaign plan.

By May of 1876, the intelligence available to Sheridan and Terry gave some idea of a large gathering of the Lakota and the Cheyenne, but was inconsistent with their prevailing assumption that the groups led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were small and not influential enough to create a large, sustainable fighting force. Only runners from the agencies in December 1875 and January 1876 had actually seen and talked to the various bands in Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming territories. Terry continued to receive intelligence from the Indian agent at Standing Rock Agency in the late spring, and interpreted from this information that the hostiles left the Little Missouri River area and had moved farther west to better hunting grounds on the Powder and Big Horn rivers in late spring. Terry made an assumption, reported to Sheridan, of two to three warriors per lodge, meaning that the hostiles had up to three thousand to forty-five hundred warriors. Terry's messages to Sheridan also indicate that he expected them to make a stand.⁴⁶ Sheridan considered movement from Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies in Nebraska to be completely unimpeded into the Powder River and Yellowstone River areas, with the agency

⁴⁶ Bailey, 133. See also Sheridan's annual report for 1876.

Lakota adding to the fighting strength of those hostiles already in the field.⁴⁷ Yet he reassured Terry that his forces were more than adequate to defeat any group of Indian warriors if only they could catch them.⁴⁸

Crook's failed attempt to get Lakota scouts shows the greater unification of the Lakota than the southern tribes, and shows the willingness of the agency Lakota to fight in 1876. At Red Cloud Agency on 15 May 1876, Crook sought help from the Indian Agent James S. Hastings. Hastings refused to help fearing for his life. Hastings did know that over eighty lodges had already left Red Cloud Agency to join the large gathering by then on the Rosebud. Despite Hastings refusal to help, Crook met with Red Cloud. Red Cloud turned him down flat, and told him that it was too late, "The Gray Fox [Crook] must understand that the Dakotas and especially the Oga-al la-las [sic] have many warriors, many guns and ponies.... Every lodge will send its young men, and they all will say of the Great Father's dogs, 'Let them come!'"⁴⁹

In response to the reservation Lakota moving to reinforce those already in the field, and due to the lack of uncommitted units in the Department of the Platte, Sheridan transferred eight companies of Fifth Cavalry from the Department of the Missouri in Kansas. These elements moved starting in mid June after some delay under their new commander, Colonel Wesley Merritt, and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Eugene Carr.⁵⁰ Sheridan's initial plan

⁴⁷ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1877* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1877), 446.

⁴⁸ National Archives, Telegram from Sheridan to Terry, 16 May 1876, "Letters sent by Division of the Missouri," RG 393.

⁴⁹ Neil C. Mangum, *Battle of the Rosebud: Prelude to the Little Bighorn* (El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2002), 25. The use of the name "Dakota" is likely to be an error in the original account used by Mangum, as there were very few Dakotas present in the large gathering and Oglallas are Lakota Sioux.

⁵⁰ Hedren, *Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 55-56. The delay allowed Merritt to take command after the retirement of the last regimental commander, Colonel William Emory.

was to have the Fifth Cavalry guard the Nebraska agencies and their access to the Black Hills road. However, Sheridan ultimately decided to send Fifth Cavalry to the west side of the Black Hills to the area of the Powder and Little Powder River.⁵¹ This action also showed the lack of linkage in the campaign of the actions of Fifth Cavalry and Crook's column. Sheridan had in effect attempted to close the agency door after the Lakota had already departed. By Sheridan moving Fifth Cavalry in June, then vacillating on whether to send it to the Powder River, it was only able to intercept one late-coming band of Cheyenne leaving the Red Cloud Agency on 17 July at War Bonnet Creek, Nebraska.. This was long after the Battles of the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn, and long after Crook sent for the regiment to reinforce his own column.

Crook finally led his column north from Fort Fetterman on 29 May 1876. It included ten companies of the Third Cavalry and five of the Second Cavalry with Lieutenant Colonel William B. Royall in overall command of the cavalry. There were two companies of Fourth Infantry and three of Ninth Infantry with Major Alexander Chambers in command of the infantry. Crook had more success recruiting from the enemies of the Lakota. By 14 June, his column included more than 1250 men, including 176 Crows and eighty-six Shoshones.⁵²

After increased sightings of Lakota scouts and upon intelligence of a large Indian village on 15 June, Crook left behind his trains at Goose Creek camp in an effort to strike the village. On the morning of 17 June, a large force surprised Crook's column during a rest halt with a fierce attack. General Crook fought off the attack from five directions at the Battle of the Rosebud after being taken by surprise and successfully pushed the Lakota and Cheyenne, estimated at over 1000 warriors, back up and off the hill surrounding his halted formation. While Crook claimed a victory, it was obvious to most observers that the results of the battle did not warrant celebration,

⁵¹ "Letters Received by the Department of the Platte," telegram, Sheridan to Crook, 20 June 1876.

⁵² Hutton, 312.

in the words of the reporter from the Helena Montana *Daily Independent*, on 30 June 1876, “Attacked by the Indians, he [Crook] maintains his ground just long enough to demonstrate his readiness to retreat. He may out-General the indolent Apache, but he is no match for the daring and aggressive Sioux.”⁵³ Crook was unwilling to pursue and he returned to his Goose Creek camp near the head of the Tongue River. Crook was apparently concerned about his wounded and the large amount of ammunition spent. His column left camp two days prior with only four days rations expecting to strike quickly and return.⁵⁴ The evening after the battle, Crook’s officers’ council was leery about chasing the Lakota after discovering their numbers not knowing the location of Terry’s columns. Crook estimated that any fight against the large Indian gathering would require additional forces, requiring him to consolidate with Terry.⁵⁵ Crook’s Indian scouts claimed satisfaction with thirteen Lakota scalps, and would apparently pursue the village no farther. With the Lakota now watching his every move, and no guides, Crook saw no hope for surprise against the village.⁵⁶ While Crook waited, the Lakota continued to watch the camp, harass it with gunfire, burn the grass in the area, and attempt to steal horses and mules.⁵⁷ Crook sent out the first reconnaissance only after three weeks at Goose Creek, the Sibley Scout on 6 July, while the expedition seemed to act like it was an extended camping trip.⁵⁸ He directed Fifth

⁵³ Charles Collins, ed. *Sioux Wars Source Book*, (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2004), 1.

⁵⁴ James Willert, *Little Big Horn Diary: Chronicle of the 1876 Indian War* (La Mirada, CA: James Willert, 1977), 171.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁶ Neil C. Mangum, *Battle of the Rosebud: Prelude to the Little Bighorn* (El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2002), 88.

⁵⁷ George W. Crook, *General George Crook: His Autobiography*, ed. Martin F. Schmitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), 197.

⁵⁸ Bourke, Vol. 1, 336-360.

Cavalry, now under his department, to join him and refused to re-start the expedition without them. Sheridan forwarded a copy of Crook's report to Terry, "I presume that long before this reaches you, you will have encountered the Indians who fought Crook."⁵⁹ Crook had no conception of how his column and his fight on the Rosebud affected Terry.

Poor communication and confusion characterized Crook's time at Goose Creek. Sheridan's communications with Terry concerning the Fifth Cavalry started a chain of confusion that affected Crook's and Sheridan's relationship until September. Sheridan, having worked out that Merritt would succeed the retiring Colonel William Emory as the commander of Fifth Cavalry, ordered them to hold at the South Cheyenne River in readiness to support Terry on 20 June, but knew the message would be slow in going since the telegraphs went down on 16 May. Sheridan was required at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and could neither wait for a reply from Terry, nor wait for Crook's initial report of the Rosebud battle.⁶⁰ Sheridan sent word on the disposition of Fifth Cavalry, and his intent to send them to the Powder River. Crook, not being in contact by telegraph, did not receive the message until much later. Because of this, he later sent for Fifth Cavalry as well but did realize they were delayed by other tasks already in the field.⁶¹ On 10 July, Crook finally learned of Custer's disaster through Indian couriers, but Crook's fortunes started to turn with the arrival of 213 Shoshones under Chief Washakie the next day.⁶² Official notification came through on 11 July via three soldiers of Seventh Infantry.⁶³ Finally, on 16 July, Crook learned from Sheridan that Fifth Cavalry had been ordered to join his

⁵⁹ Hutton, 313-4.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 315.

⁶¹ "Letters Received, Department of the Platte," telegram, Sheridan to Crook, 18 June 1876.

⁶² Crooke, 197.

⁶³ Ibid., 199.

expedition, but were delayed by a report of, “eight hundred Cheyenne and some Lakota at Red Cloud had or were about to start out to join the hostiles and thought he would make the attempt to intercept them, which I have approved. It may detain him a few days when he will be hurried with all speed to join you.”⁶⁴ Sheridan had had no concept for how the actions of Crook and of Merritt related to Terry’s column and it showed in the confusion of their actions.

Colonel John Gibbon departed from Camp Shaw on 17 March marching through often waist deep snow, and reached his assembly point at Fort Ellis on 30 March, where he learned of Crook’s defeat at Powder River and Terry’s delay at Fort Lincoln. After stopping at Fort Ellis, he used the delay to send for additional supplies from Camp Shaw, and went to the Crow Agency for some native scouts, before reaching and stopping at the site of the abandoned Fort Pease near the mouth of the Big Horn River on 21 April.⁶⁵ His collective force included seven companies of Seventh Infantry Regiment, four companies of Second Cavalry Regiment, and twenty-five Crow scouts organized under First Lieutenant James Bradley. Gibbon continued east in mid-May and sighted elements of the large Indian village near the Rosebud on 16 and 27 May, but his attempts to cross the Yellowstone to follow them on 16 May failed.⁶⁶ Though Lieutenant Bradley’s scouts spotted the large encampment twice, Gibbon failed to report it to Terry until they met on 8 June. Gibbon did very little to press or gain further information on the Lakota, Instead, he obeyed the letter of Terry’s guidance to stay north of the Yellowstone and go no further than the mouth of the Big Horn River, rather than the intent to attack the encampment wherever he found it.⁶⁷ When

⁶⁴ “Letters received, Department of the Platte,” telegram, Sheridan to Crook, 16 July 1876.

⁶⁵ Gray, 73-74.

⁶⁶ Hedren, *Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 82-84.

⁶⁷ Gray, 74-78.

Terry learned of Gibbon's missed opportunities, it only increased the anxiety for Terry and Custer to attack before the large gathering of Lakota and Cheyenne could get away.

While Crook struggled at Goose Creek to regroup and figure out a way to restore success to his campaign for nearly six weeks, Terry's column suffered the largest single defeat of the Indian Wars at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on 25 and 26 June. His isolation from Crook's column affected his tactical plan by forcing him to split his force, sending Custer to attempt to envelope from the huge Lakota and Cheyenne camp on the Little Big Horn from the south. Without knowledge of Crook's fight at the Rosebud, Terry could not appreciate the unprecedented size and fighting strength of the Lakota and Cheyenne camp.

Terry's Dakota column was overwhelmed by the aftermath of Custer's loss. Upon Terry's arrival at the battlefield on 27 June in the immediate aftermath of the battle, the tasks of digging graves, evacuating wounded, securing the area, and waiting for supplies consumed their efforts as they watched the last remnants of the great village drift away.⁶⁸ Terry understood that he needed to continue after the big village, but that he would need additional supplies, and sent his aide, Captain Edward W. Smith, to Fort Lincoln to arrange to refit the Dakota column with supplies and additional cavalry mounts.⁶⁹ Terry still wanted to pursue the Lakota and Cheyenne and dispatched Captain Edward Ball with a detachment to locate the Indian withdrawal route on 28 June. Ball followed the trail for fifteen miles until the grass burned by the Indians ruined the trail where it divided going southeast and southwest. Terry learned from Crow scouts that Crook was in the area at Goose Creek on 7 July, and officially from Sheridan over a week later. Terry tried several times to establish communications with Crook in order to get the campaign moving again, getting through on 10 July, but he reckoned there was little he could do until they

⁶⁸ Bailey, 156.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

consolidated and worked out a plan.⁷⁰ Terry's wait for reinforcements and supplies moving by steamer from Fort Lincoln stymied the Dakota column for the month of July.

Sheridan reacted quickly to the Little Big Horn disaster and started moving reinforcements to Terry and Crook. While in Philadelphia, he ordered six companies of the Twenty-second Infantry under Lieutenant Colonel Elwell Otis to join General Terry, and instructed General Pope in the Department of the Missouri to send Colonel Nelson Miles with all of his Fifth Infantry from Fort Leavenworth to reinforce Terry's column. Sheridan directed Merritt's Fifth Cavalry to the Sage River between Fort Laramie and Camp Robinson to stand in readiness to join Crook. Sheridan still initially refused to give positive guidance to the two department commanders. He tried to reassure Sherman, and perhaps himself, "Terry and Crook are all right. There is nothing to be regretted but the loss of poor Custer and the officers and men with him. Terry's column was sufficiently strong to have handled the Indians, if Custer had waited for the junction." Sheridan left for Chicago from Philadelphia as quickly as possible, "As soon as I get home I will take the campaign fully in hand, and will push it to a successful termination sending every man that can be spared."⁷¹

Due to the unique circumstances and interplay of human agency at the Little Big Horn battle, historians tend to focus on the unique circumstances of the battle. From a modern operational art perspective, it is more significant that this was the third of four unsuccessful, disconnected engagements following Crook's failures at the Powder River in March and at the Rosebud in June. Crook followed these failures with a counter-productive victory at Slim Buttes in early September. By that time, Crook's actions were still disconnected from the larger campaign, but Sheridan had taken the campaign in hand and developed a sound approach that

⁷⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁷¹ Hutton, 318-9.

would be successful. The significant impact of the Battle of Little Big Horn for the campaign was that it allowed Sheridan to gain additional resources and force a change in his thinking for a fully developed campaign. After the failures of the campaign up to June 1876, Sheridan solidified his ideas into what the Army now calls operational art. The need to take full advantage of the new authority and resources forced the very direct Sheridan to attack the problem of hostile Lakota and Cheyenne less directly, and put together a series of actions linked in purpose that would achieve his strategic end of pacifying the Lakota and preventing them from interfering with their Indian or white neighbors.

The Emergence of Operational Art

The emergence of what modern United States Army doctrine calls operational art occurred in the aftermath of the Battle of Little Big Horn when Sheridan realized that the Lakota and Cheyenne could not be pacified by a summertime decisive battle. He could not defeat the small core of non-agency Lakota without first establishing the conditions that made it possible for the Army to isolate them from the greater part of their fighting strength. The summer campaign confirmed that the Army could not decisively beat the Lakota and Cheyenne at the peak of their strength, while the Army was stretched beyond its limits of communication and logistical support. Sheridan immediately worked to gain Congressional approval for the two Yellowstone River posts he desired to occupy the unceded territories and for military control of the reservations. While he determined how best to use these new resources, the two department commanders consolidated forces at Sheridan's urging. Soon after combining, Terry and Crook rediscovered the dilemma that combining a force big enough to defeat the unprecedented Lakota and Cheyenne gathering prevented their ability to catch any group or track their movements. After three weeks, the combined column broke up with each department commander pursuing his own objective. Crook boldly cut his communications and support in order to strike for the Black Hills. As a

result, his column suffered through the “horse meat march” to achieve a counterproductive victory at Slim Buttes in early September.

When Crook regained communication with Sheridan, Sheridan had a new plan for the campaign and was moving extensive reinforcements to the area. It is important to understand that these reinforcements were not to bolster fighting forces in the field, but to secure the agencies, confiscate Lakota and Cheyenne horses and firearms, and to prevent those Lakota and Cheyenne on the reservation from ever leaving. Sheridan spent most of September 1876 communicating his vision to the department commanders, positioning reinforcements at each of the agencies and preparing for winter pursuit of the remaining hostiles. To help realize his new approach, Sheridan placed his two most ruthless and effective commanders, Colonel Nelson Miles, and Colonel Ranald Mackenzie in key positions under Crook and Terry.

Prior to 1876, Sheridan had desired two posts on the Yellowstone River in order to project forces into the unceded territory, and two new posts on the Missouri River, where he wanted to move the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies in order to ease the cost of support. Sheridan was frustrated that the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies were not within the Sioux Reservation boundaries. His desire for the Missouri River posts was an effort to simplify Army supply, control and Black Hills policy enforcement.⁷² In 1874, Sheridan considered the Sioux reservation well isolated with forts to the north, south and east, but requested two in the Yellowstone valley, and one more in the Black Hills in order to surround the Sioux and control them.⁷³ The following year he directed an expedition to select the sites for the posts on the Yellowstone led by the senior officer of his staff in Chicago, Colonel James Forsyth, one at the mouth of the Big Horn River and one at the mouth of the Tongue River, and requested funds from

⁷² Ibid., 289.

⁷³ Ibid., 290.

Congress to build the posts.⁷⁴ Sheridan's 1876 annual report is self-righteous, but illuminates on the integration of the of the Yellowstone forts with the other Army efforts:

For some years it had been apparent to me that the marauding bands who lived in this country, and who formed a nucleus for all the dissatisfied and unmanageable Indians at the Missouri River. [Those at] Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies, would have to be subjugated and made to feel the power of the Government: and as a means to this end I recommended the occupation of the country in which these hostiles roamed by two permanent and large military posts. Had my advice been taken, there would have been no war. These posts would not only have been the means of preventing the assembling of Indians in large bodies in that great buffalo region, but they would have given us depots of supplies and shelter for troops that could, on account of the short distances from these supplies, operate at any season of the year. In addition to these advantages, the troops would have become familiar with the haunts of the Indians, learned the country thoroughly, and would not have been obliged, as they afterward were, to operate blindly in an almost totally unknown region, comprising an area of almost ninety thousand square miles.⁷⁵

Within two days of learning of Custer's defeat, he requested authorization for the two forts again through Sherman, and on 14 July, Sherman informed Sheridan that the Congress authorized \$200,000 for their construction.⁷⁶

The approval of these two posts represented the Army's return to garrison that area after departing from the Bozeman Trail in 1868. The Army had abandoned Fort Phil Kearny, Fort Connor, and Fort C.F. Smith, built in a succession of efforts from 1864 to 1867 along the Bozeman Trail.⁷⁷ Sheridan and most Army officers deeply opposed the decision to abandon these posts in the Treaty of 1868. Throughout July 1876, Terry concentrated on bringing up the supplies on the Yellowstone to the mouths of the Tongue, Rosebud and Big Horn Rivers that would allow the two new posts to be established. By the first week of August, he had created

⁷⁴ Sheridan, *Record of Engagements*, 48.

⁷⁵ Department of War, *Annual Report for 1876*, 439.

⁷⁶ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 16; "Special Files," telegraph, Sherman to Sheridan, 14 July 1876.

⁷⁷ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 7.

three sizable depots at these locations and brought in additional elements of Fifth and Twenty-second Infantry Regiments to help guard them.

In early July 1876, Sheridan initially wanted Crook to strike the Lakota and Cheyenne again, recommending to the department commanders that they join and move as a combined force to meet the unprecedented strength of the Lakota and Cheyenne. Generals Crook and Terry readily shared this view to combine into a single large force and cooperate. Crook complained about the delay of Merritt's column and that his current force now seemed too small to Sheridan, "I am at a loss what to do: I can prevent their attack by assuming the aggressive, but as my effective strength is less than twelve hundred, exclusive of Indian allies, I could do but little beyond scattering them which would render it impossible to subdue them."⁷⁸ Terry suggested to Crook that they consolidate even before Sheridan first suggested to do so on 16 July. In his message on 10 July, Terry sent to Crook, "The great and, to me, wholly unexpected strength which the Indians have developed seems to me to make it important and indeed necessary that we should unite to at least act in close co-operation," and offered to follow whatever plan Crook developed, despite Terry's seniority.⁷⁹ Sheridan was less patient with Crook on 2 August after five weeks of inaction, "If you do not feel strong enough to attack and defeat the Indians, it is best for you to form a junction with Terry at once. I have sent you and General Terry every available man that can be spared in the Division and if it has not made the column strong enough, Terry and you should unite forces."⁸⁰

When the two columns joined on 10 August, despite an initial feeling of hope, an atmosphere of futility and frustration set in when the column became too cumbersome to catch

⁷⁸ Bourke, Vol. 1, 381.

⁷⁹ "Letters Received, Department of the Platte," letter, Terry to Crook, 9 July 1876.

⁸⁰ Gray, 207.

any hostile bands. However, Terry quickly fixated on his concern that the Indians would escape north across the Yellowstone, ignorant of the full extent of the breakup of the large gathering, while Crook quickly realized that no group of Indians could be caught by so large and ponderous a force as their combined elements. Terry still felt that the great Indian camp could be caught, not fully realizing the extent of its dispersal. Crook's forces showed signs of fatigue on arrival despite their rest at Goose Creek. The mounts of Fifth Cavalry had moved continuously from the Department of the Missouri since early June, and were beaten daily into bivouac by Crook's infantry by this time. Because he could not carry much on his mule pack train, Crook had to wait for supplies to come up from his Goose Creek camp on the Rosebud.⁸¹ After the loss of over 200 Shoshones and other civilian guides on 18 August, Terry suggested to strike out quickly in pursuit, living off their horses, while Crook wanted to resupply his column one last time and then strike out on his own faster than the huge combined column.⁸² However, Crook could not leave without abandoning the supplies provided by Terry and incurring significant risk of not being able to supply himself in his movement south through Dakota Territory.

By 25 August, the department commanders decided to split ways. Terry made his decision to split the combined column and part ways with Crook based on refined guidance from Sheridan relayed in person from Colonel James Forsyth, General Sheridan's executive officer. Terry intended to intercept near Glendive Crossing a body of Lakota that had to cross the Yellowstone going north before returning to Fort Lincoln. At the same time, Crook intended to intercept a large group that split and appeared to be headed toward the agencies threatening settlements in the Black Hills.⁸³ Crook was even more anxious to split from the column and

⁸¹ Greene, *Slim Buttes*, 29.

⁸² Bourke, Vol. 2, 76; Gray, 219-220. See also Bourke, Vol. 2, 45.

⁸³ Bourke, Vol. 2, 88-9; Alfred H. Terry, *The Terry Letters*, ed. James Willert (La Mirada, CA: James Willert, 1980), 58-59.

pursue the group that appeared to be moving to the Black Hills and the agencies. His decision led to a nearly disastrous trek through Dakota Territory under starvation conditions, culminating in a raid on a small band of Minneconjou Lakota at Slim Buttes. While his attack was tactically successful, Crook soon learned after the battle at Slim Buttes that he was completely at odds with the division commander's newly developed vision to finish the campaign.

Crook's attack on American Horse's village at Slim Buttes was counterproductive and disrupted plans of many of those Indians to surrender at the agencies. Since Crook's column struck American Horse's band on the Great Sioux Reservation, the Lakota were also concerned about retribution from the Army once they reached the agencies.⁸⁴ Crook's own report to Sheridan on 10 September acknowledged that the American Horse's people claimed that they were going back to the reservation, "The prisoners [at Slim Buttes] further stated that most of the hostile Indians were now going into the agencies, with the exception of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull with their immediate followers."⁸⁵ There were other indications that Crook had intercepted a band of summer-roaming agency Lakota on their way back to the agency after the summer's hunting and fighting, since they had agency-issued canvas tipis and metal utensils instead of buffalo hide, along with captured Seventh Cavalry equipment.⁸⁶ Merritt worked through the eastern Black Hills without significant contact and then out to the south fork of the Cheyenne River from 13 to 20 October, and encountered only old trails, an implicit acknowledgment that Crook's march had been futile above the tactical level.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 66; Greene, *Slim Buttes*, 115.

⁸⁵ Bourke, Vol. 2, 116; Greene, *Slim Buttes*, 131. Bourke quoted Crook's report.

⁸⁶ Bourke, Vol. 2, 18.

⁸⁷ Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 11.

In August and September, Sheridan explained his vision for the rest of the campaign in a series of telegrams for Terry and Crook to prepare for a winter campaign, establish posts in the Yellowstone and Powder River countries, stockpile supplies, and disarm and dismount the Lakota. These telegrams caught up to Crook soon after Slim Buttes, on 10 September. The first telegram to Crook and Terry, dated 17 August, changed the direction of the campaign:

The Bill for increasing the Regiments of Cavalry in the field passed Congress and I have designated Fort D. A. Russell as the rendezvous for equipping and mounting the recruits for the 2d, 3d, and 5th Regiments of Cavalry. Colonel Mackenzie is now at Red Cloud and in a few days will have six companies of the 4th Cavalry, two companies of the 5th and one of the 3d, four companies of artillery and five companies of Infantry there under his command. I have ordered the whole of the Eleventh Infantry from Texas to Cheyenne and Standing Rock Agencies. I will give orders to General Terry to-day to establish a cantonment for the winter at Tongue River and will send supplies there for fifteen hundred men, Cavalry and Infantry. I think also of establishing a cantonment for the winter at Goose Creek or some other point on your line for a force of about ten hundred men. I will send to you one hundred of the best Pawnee scouts, under Major [Frank] North, regularly enlisted, as Congress increased the number [of authorized scouts] to ten hundred. We must hold the country you and Terry have been operating in, this winter, or else every Indian at the Agencies will go out as soon as we commence dismounting and disarming them. Let me know at once what you think of the logment (sic) at Goose Creek or vicinity...[Of Terry's posts] one will be at mouth of Tongue River, the other at mouth of Little Big Horn.⁸⁸

This telegram shows the emergence of key elements of Sheridan's new vision for the campaign, and the idea that they link in purpose. Sheridan describes the purposes of reinforcements: for holding new posts in the unceded territories against any hostile Indians there or from the agencies, and for security at the agencies to begin disarming and dismounting the Lakota and Cheyenne. Sheridan saw the forts and scouts as necessary to hold the unceded territory in support of the disarming and dismounting effort at the agencies. Sheridan clearly links force arrayal, disarming and dismounting, and extending reach into the unceded territory as vital to the success of the campaign, and begins to sequence these actions in time, space and purpose in late July and early August 1876.

⁸⁸ Bourke, Vol. 2, 122-3.

Sheridan sent another telegram on 23 August that elaborated on his concept for extending reach into the Powder River and Yellowstone country. After reiterating the other elements, Sheridan introduced the need to establish, or re-establish a network of posts to support those on the Yellowstone and the movement of forces to garrison this support network. Camp Reno was “especially desirable as it covers the Powder River country and is shortest from the base of supplies.” Due to communication problems, Sheridan expected Crook to go to his Goose Creek camp, rather than the Black Hills. He instructed Crook, “You will, therefore, after your return to Goose Creek from your present Expedition, detail five companies of the 5th Cavalry and such Companies of Infantry as will make a garrison sufficiently strong to hold the place.” Sheridan had also sent Colonel James Forsyth to see Terry in August to communicate the expectation for Miles to maintain relentless pursuit of the Lakota and Cheyenne throughout the winter while occupied at the Tongue River. When Terry complained that the supplies to build the two new forts could not move down the Yellowstone due to the summer low water levels, Miles and Forsyth developed a solution. Lieutenant Colonel Elwell Otis and his regiment would assist in pushing supplies from an enlarged Glendive Crossing cantonment.⁸⁹

Fighting was implicitly of secondary importance in Sheridan’s explanation directing Crook to send cavalry to Terry. Terry was short of cavalry because of, “the necessity of using the 7th [Cavalry] in dismounting and disarming Indians at the Missouri River Agencies.” Again, Sheridan linked constant presence in the unceded territories as crucial to the success of disarming and dismounting at the agencies, “[I]f we should give up the Powder River, Big Horn and Yellowstone country, all or most of the Indians would escape there, when we commence to dismount, disarm and punish the Agency Indians who have been out, and are now coming in.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Bailey, 164.

⁹⁰ Bourke, Vol. 2, 124.

A second telegram the same day explained why Sheridan reached these conclusions, and restated the intent for Miles and his forces to operate throughout the winter to encourage the Lakota and Cheyenne to go to the reservation where they could no longer wage war. Accordingly, Sheridan sent the most effort, and the preponderance of forces to disarm and dismount at the agencies. Where a company or two with a captain in command previously garrisoned the agencies, Sheridan envisioned a much greater force:

The misfortune which came to Custer virtually destroyed all hope of making the campaign successful by getting a fight out of the Indians. Since that time, I have been bending everything to the only plan which will be ultimately successful, namely, to get military control over the Indians at the Agencies and the permanent occupation of the Yellowstone country,—by this I mean all the country west of the Black Hills. ...Colonel Miles will have at his cantonment the 5th Infantry and six companies of the 22d and the five companies of Cavalry from your command. The 7th Cavalry had to go in as the Indians at the Missouri River Agencies will not permit the dismounting and unconditional surrender without sufficient force to compel them. I ordered 11th Infantry from Texas and will soon have at Standing Rock nine companies and at Cheyenne Agency nine companies. Colonel Mackenzie has at Red Cloud nine companies of Cavalry and nine Companies of Infantry and Artillery and as soon as it gets a little nearer winter the work of disarming and dismounting will commence.⁹¹

After learning that Terry had gone ten days with no contact with the hostile bands, Sheridan sent another two telegrams on 25 and 27 August to Terry to wrap up active campaigning and focus on the posts along the Yellowstone. Sheridan directed Terry to garrison the mouth of the Tongue River and Big Horn River with fifteen hundred men at the Tongue River cantonment and house them “the best way they can.” Sheridan directed that Miles and Fifth Infantry garrison the location with Otis and six companies of the Twenty-second Infantry, plus a regiment of cavalry. By the conclusion of the summer campaign, this group of forces became Fifth Infantry, one small battalion of the Twenty-second Infantry (with Otis and three other companies at Glendive), plus the so-called Montana battalion of the Second Cavalry. Sheridan directed that Seventh Cavalry return to Fort Lincoln, and elements of the Sixth and Seventeenth Infantry

⁹¹ Ibid., 124-125.

Regiments to occupy the posts in the northern Dakota Territory and Fort Buford in eastern Montana Territory.⁹² Having found no hostiles going north across the Yellowstone River, Terry devoted all attention to the new cantonment and effectively ended the mobile portion of the expedition, staying only to manage the movement of supplies to support it.⁹³ He disagreed with Sheridan's decision to end the summer campaign, but acknowledged that the expedition in the field consumed supplies needed to support Fifth and Twenty-second Infantry Regiments over the winter. Despite the positive action of establishing new posts, the general atmosphere of Terry's column, expressed by the general himself, was that the failure of the summer campaign would require another large campaign the following summer.⁹⁴ Terry understood that Sheridan's new plan no longer focused on a large punitive campaign only after he started carrying it out.

In September 1876, Sheridan needed his department commanders to focus on establishing his newly approved posts, and more importantly, to manage the larger effort at the agencies. While Sheridan sent a large number of reinforcements to the two department commanders, it is important to understand the vast majority of them did not engage in active fighting against the Lakota and Cheyenne on campaign. Instead, the majority of the additional units conducted the dismounting and disarmament at the agencies. This task became Sheridan's primary focus. In August and September 1876, only the elements of Fifth Cavalry that joined Crook actually increased the fighting strength of either column. With Terry's column, six companies from Fifth Infantry and four from Twenty-second Infantry arrived the first week of August, but Terry used

⁹² Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 56.

⁹³ Cozzens, 407. From Diehl, "Terry's Column in the Field, Camp on the Yellowstone, Mouth of Glendive Creek, Montana," *Chicago Tribune*, 5 September 1876.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 412. From Diehl, "Terry's Column in the Field, Camp on the Yellowstone, Mouth of Glendive Creek, Montana," *Chicago Tribune*, 6 September 1876.

these elements to guard supplies at the Tongue River cantonment and other areas.⁹⁵ This meant that by the time he was ready to start movement to link up with Crook, his striking force only increased by five infantry companies, not enough to offset the losses of Seventh Cavalry. The reinforcements were meant for Indian agency security, not for active campaigning. Of the additional fifty companies of cavalry, infantry, and artillery that Sheridan sent to the two departments in the second half of 1876, seventeen went solely to reinforce agency garrisons and their supporting posts: Fort Stevenson and Standing Rock Agency, Fort Sully and Cheyenne River Agency, Camp Sheridan and Spotted Tail Agency, and Camp Robinson and Red Cloud Agency.⁹⁶ All of the remaining thirty-three reinforcement companies that actively campaigned sometime between August 1876 and May 1877, and nearly all of the companies used on the active expeditions, save for those of Fifth and Twenty-second Infantry Regiments, secured the various Indian agencies or executed disarming and dismounting operations.⁹⁷ In addition to the initial wave of dismounting and disarming over 15,000 Lakota and Cheyenne at these five agencies in October 1876, the Army accepted the surrender of, disarmed, and dismounted at approximately 3,500 more between November 1876 and September 1877.⁹⁸

Sheridan had seen the futility of the winter campaign and the combined column in the summer, and had won the fights with Congress and the Interior Department for the Yellowstone River posts and control of the reservation agencies. Sheridan then sought to use these resources to best effect in a series of actions tied by purpose, and not only to bring the Lakota and Cheyenne to a single decisive battle. Sheridan pushed supplies to establish the Tongue River

⁹⁵ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 269; Hutton, 320; Gray, 208-210; Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 43-44.

⁹⁶ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1876*, 42-53.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁹⁸ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, 59.

cantonment in the unceded territory west of the Black Hills and established a network of bases to support operations in the unceded territory, because he realized that these were necessary to support his efforts at the agencies. Sheridan regarded the disarmament program at the agencies and the posts on the Yellowstone as necessary to separate the agency Lakota and Cheyenne from the hostile non-agency bands, and to prevent them from returning to the unceded territories. By October 1876 Sheridan no longer sought a single expedition punish the remaining hostiles, knowing that the winter weather would soon prohibit further operations until spring, when large-scale campaigning could resume. Instead, as he stated on 1 October 1876 in his annual report, “There is a fair prospect of a complete settlement by the defeat and surrender of all the hostile Indians, with their arms, ponies, men, women, and children before the winter is over.”⁹⁹

After Sheridan’s difficulties in communicating with Crook, and Crook’s propensity for following only his own agenda, Sheridan went to Fort Laramie to meet with Crook from 21-22 September 1876. At this meeting, Sheridan restated his campaign approach previously spelled out in the series of messages earlier that month. He also fully developed Crook’s part of that design that led to the development of a network of forts in the Powder River valley that would support Crook’s November expedition and future operations including one just west of the Black Hills. Crook previously planned on operating from the Black Hills following the summer expedition, and had positioned supplies and Fifth Cavalry to start that effort. Sheridan described in detail the actions to disarm the agencies, with the Department of Dakota’s efforts to begin soon, and Crook’s own department to follow after with confiscated goods and animals sold and the profits going to buy cattle for the Indians. Crook immediately directed Captain Pollack and his company of Ninth Infantry to start building a cantonment at the abandoned Fort Reno.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1876*, 440.

¹⁰⁰ Hutton, 325; Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 8-9.

Sheridan's control of the reservation was the key to separating the agency Indians from the true winter roaming hostiles, and the key to a lasting peace with the Lakota and Cheyenne. Sheridan stated in his telegram to the department commanders, "As soon as we take possession, a list of all Indians in [at the agencies] will be made and no Indian or their families now out or who may hereafter go out, will be permitted to return without unconditional personal surrender, as well as the surrender of all ponies, guns and property." He recognized that by taking the horses and weapons he was stripping away the key tools that allowed the Lakota and Cheyenne to hunt buffalo and raid their neighboring tribes or white settlers, "A Sioux on foot is a Sioux no longer."¹⁰¹ The agency Lakota would no longer be able to roam and hunt freely in the summer, or militarily support their non-agency cousins.

His guidance was on department lines that Fourth and Fifth Cavalry Regiments under Crook were to secure the Nebraska agencies on the Platte, and elements of Seventh Cavalry, First Infantry, Seventeenth Infantry, and Twentieth Infantry under Terry were to secure the arms and ponies at the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River agencies. Terry accompanied the sortie commanded by Colonel Samuel Sturgis, which started at the Standing Rock Agency and went to the Cheyenne River Agency from 18-26 October. This sortie confiscated over 3300 horses and ponies, which the Army sold, with the proceeds used to buy cattle and oxen for the agency Lakota.¹⁰² True to his form of following his own agenda regardless of orders, Crook chose to disarm the Lakota only at the Red Cloud Agency but not at the Spotted Tail Agency due to the non-cooperation at Red Cloud. Threatened by the loss of food to compel compliance, Red Cloud's Oglala band moved away from the agency to Chadron Creek twenty miles distant from the agency. On the night of 22-23 October, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie and his regiment sortied

¹⁰¹ Bourke, Vol. 2, 33; Bailey, 167.

¹⁰² Bailey, 167; Hedren, *Sioux War Orders of Battle*, 131-6.

out from Camp Robinson with the support of an attached company of Pawnees. They bloodlessly dismounted Red Cloud's band and escorted them back to the reservation.¹⁰³ Crook not only left the Minneconjou Lakota at Spotted Tail agency armed, but he was finally able to enroll 500 as scouts for use against Crazy Horse, an Oglala. Sheridan, while commending Mackenzie, was furious that Crook disobeyed an order.¹⁰⁴ Crook saw the recruitment of Lakota scouts as a divisive tool similar to the one he used against the Apaches, but Sheridan saw the need and method of dividing the more united and successful Lakota as fundamentally different from the Apaches, stating, "There must be no halfway work in this matter. All Indians out there must be on our side without question, or else on the side of the hostiles."¹⁰⁵

Winter Campaign and Decision

With the end of the warm weather and the return of the summer roaming Lakota and Cheyenne to the reservation where Sheridan's forces disarmed and dismounted them, the remaining winter roaming Indians lost the preponderance of their fighting strength permanently. Though some of the winter roaming hostile bands, especially Sitting Bull's, openly mocked the agency dwelling, summer-roaming Lakota, these bands provided the vast majority of warrior and a great deal of the supplies needed to hunt and fight. Sheridan and many Army officers understood this from observation of the Sioux and their allies before and after the Civil War. In effect, Sheridan used the disarmament program at the agencies to drive a wedge between the winter roaming bands and the preponderance of their summer fighting strength. Sheridan consistently estimated that Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were minor chiefs with small followings,

¹⁰³ Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Hutton, 325.

¹⁰⁵ Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 23-5.

and that the hostiles represented only a small part of the total Sioux.¹⁰⁶ However, he did not expect these summer-roaming agency Lakota to provide enough fighting strength to the “non-agency” Lakota already living and hunting year-round off the reservation to defeat the summer expeditions. He did nevertheless understand the role of summer roaming to provide an outlet for an akacita society, where young warriors must hunt and fight as an integral feature of cultural function.¹⁰⁷

Sheridan recognized that a relentless pursuit of the remaining non-agency bands in the unceded territories was necessary to ensure the success of the Army efforts at the agencies. Led primarily by Miles and Mackenzie, and enabled by new bases for support, these efforts won small, but important victories at Cedar Creek, Fort Peck, against Dull Knife, and at Wolf Mountain. While these victories did not kill many Lakota and Cheyenne, they did show the remaining non-agency bands that it was not feasible to avoid the reservation. When supply issues stopped active campaigning in December 1876 and January 1877, Miles and Crook capitalized on the fall victories by sending out small envoys to gain the final surrender of most remaining bands by the late spring. The defeat of Lame Deer’s Minneconjou band in May 1877 represented the last major engagement against Lakota resistance to the reservations.

Sheridan did not intend control of the reservations primarily to get rid of the corruption of the Indian bureau, but instead to prevent their support of the non-agency Lakota roaming the unceded territories. One of Sheridan’s first orders to the Army units at the agencies was to gain an accurate census of the Indians and a ban on the sale of ammunition to them. Based on significant disparities in the census, Sheridan linked these disparities to the support relationship from the agency Indians to the hostile bands in the unceded territory, “It was then easy to see

¹⁰⁶ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1876*, 447.

¹⁰⁷ Sheridan, *Record of Engagements*, 58. See also Robert Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*.

where the small bands [of non-agency Lakota] originally out, and upon whom the war was being waged, [where these bands] obtained their strength and supplies.”¹⁰⁸ From September to October 1876, Fourth Cavalry officers at the agencies in Nebraska witnessed the relationship first hand, as reported by Henry Bellas. “They watched all our movements, noted the arrival of every new body of troops and no doubt continually reported, by runners, every item of news to their friends who were still out from the reservations,” noted Bellas, “they furnished these renegades with supplies of provisions and arms.”¹⁰⁹ The soldiers of General Terry’s column also recognized this relationship as reported by Charles Diehl in early August, “There is every indication that the hostile band has been heavily reinforced by Indians from the agencies, who, from fear of having their ponies and arms confiscated, have determined to link their fortunes with the outlawed tribes. Their wives and children evidently intend remaining in the northern region during the winter.”¹¹⁰

Historian John Gray developed a thorough analysis of the total Lakota and Cheyenne population during the campaign, including both the summer roaming agency Lakota and Cheyenne, and the winter roaming hostile bands. In Gray’s analysis of the Lakota and Cheyenne active in the campaign, the total winter roaming hostile population by June 1876 was 480 lodges with about 850 warriors from a population of about 3400, to which the summer roaming Indians added another 736 lodges with a population of about 8200, including 1300 warriors.¹¹¹ These numbers indicate that the preponderance of Lakota and Cheyenne fighting strength in the summer of 1876 was from the summer roaming agency Indians.

¹⁰⁸ Sheridan, *Record of Engagements*, 58. See also Department of War, *Annual Report for 1876*, 443.

¹⁰⁹ Greene, *Battles and Skirmishes*, 169.

¹¹⁰ Cozzens, 400.

¹¹¹ Gray, 320.

Sheridan saw the active campaign developing in terms of a smaller, relentless pursuit throughout the winter, characterized by the type of hard warfare he practiced in the Civil War. Sheridan's use of hard war had ample precedent with some of his regimental commanders, especially with Mackenzie and Miles. Sheridan urged relentless pursuit in the conflict against the Kickapoos in 1873. In that conflict, he instructed Mackenzie to pursue the Kickapoos to complete destruction into Mexico, regardless of international borders, and knew to expect the same type of ruthless pursuit from Miles based on Red River War experience.¹¹² In a note to Sherman, he connected the hard war methodology from the Civil War to the war against the Lakota and Cheyenne stating, "During the war did any one hesitate to attack a village or town occupied by the enemy because women or children were within its limits? Did we cease to throw shells into Vicksburg or Atlanta because women and children were there?" From Sheridan's perspective, "If a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack."¹¹³ Sheridan intended to deny the Lakota and Cheyenne the use of the winter to rest and prepare for the next summer's hostilities. The movement of supplies for the Tongue River cantonment, as reported by Charles Diehl was "the first indication that an active and relentless campaign would be made against the Indians and has given new life to the command, as the repetition of this year's work next season was to be dreaded, when the outlawed tribes would be reinforced by thousands from the agencies." From the troops' perspective, any alternative "can better be borne than another season's murderous work."¹¹⁴

¹¹² Hutton, 222. As an example, Hutton quotes Sheridan's guidance to Mackenzie, "I want you to be bold, enterprising, and at all times full of energy, when you begin, let it be a campaign of annihilation, obliterate and complete destruction. ... I think you understand what I want done. And the way you should employ your force."

¹¹³ Hutton, 185; Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Cozzens, 401.

Indian movements from July through September played into Sheridan's concept by the breakup of the unprecedented, large group. While wary of Crook's and Terry's commands, the large group at Little Big Horn stayed mostly together in July and moved slowly to the Rosebud, spreading out to hunt on the Rosebud and upper Little Big Horn, before moving northeast to the Tongue River. They carefully avoided significant contact with the large Army columns and kept small groups of warriors near the Yellowstone and Goose Creek to watch the columns. Once they identified the Tongue River cantonments, the large group began to split up, with Sitting Bull's mostly Hunkpapa band going north of the Yellowstone, Crazy Horse's Oglallas, most of the Minneconjous, and the Cheyenne going to the Big Horn mountains, and the summer roamers returning to the agencies in late August and September. For the Lakota and Cheyenne, the fighting was over.¹¹⁵

Sheridan understood that the Sioux had come to the plains more than 75 years prior with an economic system based on the buffalo and enabled by firearms and horses, and without these implements they could not maintain that lifestyle, and in turn their resistance. In Sheridan's mind, every Lakota disarmed and dismounted was separated from the hostiles and "a Sioux without a horse is not a Sioux." The disarmament represented the culminating act of the hard war mentality in Sheridan's mind against the Lakota. The Army already confined most other tribes in the Division of the Missouri to the reservations, had their habitations and supplies destroyed, and had land forcibly taken from them, but these tribes kept their horses and rifles. The Lakota and Cheyenne were the only tribes west of the Mississippi River so stripped of their cultural means, in the form of horses and rifles, in such a catastrophic way.

Sheridan understood that confinement to the reservation changed the Lakota and Cheyenne way of life profoundly. Confined to the reservations, they surrendered most of the

¹¹⁵ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 33-4.

vital customs of their life on the plains. Warfare against rival tribes was not possible. Planning and conducting the hunt with all of its associated rituals, which consumed most of the time and ambition of the Lakota was also not possible. Without access to the buffalo, the Lakota and Cheyenne had no means to support themselves or develop anything in terms of their own cultural value.¹¹⁶ Most of their tribal institutions such as the Sun Dance, tribal circles, and key cultural elements such as the Shirt Wearers started to disappear.¹¹⁷ Pragmatically, Sheridan understood these issues to be the underlying causes of war. From his Annual Report for 1878, he stated that war was inevitable since settlement by whites, “took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them.”¹¹⁸ From Sheridan’s perspective, the hard war approach of disarmed, dismounted and reservation-confined life for the Lakota and Cheyenne made sense because it decisively separated settlers and Indians in conflict. The conditions were now in place to start the constant pursuit of the remaining hostile bands that would make disarmament and dismounting possible, and confinement to the reservation permanent for the Lakota and Cheyenne.

Sheridan also understood that these actions required for his hard war approach were anathema to the Lakota way of life, especially for the non-agency leaders like Sitting Bull. The preponderance of the agency Lakota were not expecting to be disarmed and dismounted upon their return to the agencies. In September and October, word of these actions spread quickly, caused many Lakota to flee the reservations for shelter with the non-agency bands, and strengthened the resolve of those like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse to stay out. Sitting Bull, still flush with the victories of the summer, and having observed the three Army columns of the

¹¹⁶ Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 22.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁸ Hutton, 182-3.

summer expedition retreat back to their bases, felt no compulsion to surrender. Sitting Bull felt that he could dictate terms to the Army, and in early October 1876, he attacked a supply train from Glendive to the Tongue River cantonment on 10 and 16 October, and left a note for Lieutenant Colonel Otis:

YELLOWSTONE.

I want to know what you are doing traveling on this road. You scare all the buffalo away. I want to hunt on the place. I want you to turn back from here. If you don't I will fight you again. I want you to leave what you have got here, and turn back from here.

I am your friend,

SITTING BULL.

I mean all the rations you have got and some powder. Wish you would write as soon as you can.¹¹⁹

In the Department of Dakota, Colonel Nelson Miles was prepared to respond to Sitting Bull's challenge and maintain the aggressive occupation of the unceded territories that Sheridan envisioned. In August, Miles was initially not enthused about the intended position of his regiment as a security force prior to arrival but quickly saw an opportunity to strike the remaining hostile Lakota. While passing Standing Rock Agency in mid-July aboard steamer en route from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Lincoln, Miles learned from a newspaper of the intent to use his regiment to garrison the two new posts on the Yellowstone. Miles initially viewed this as a bad arrangement that would exhaust his men in supply activities and allow the Indians to isolate his small regiment from support.¹²⁰ However, the opportunistic Miles saw his chance to avoid constant harassment throughout the winter by making the country in his area untenable for the Indians and indirectly embraced Sheridan's vision for Fifth Infantry Regiment's role.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, 491. Quoted from Lieutenant Colonel Elwell Otis' annual report for 1877.

¹²⁰ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

Miles and Fifth Infantry Regiment made the first attack of the fall on Sitting Bull's band at the Battle of Cedar Creek on 21 October 1876. Miles departed the Tongue River cantonment on 14 October and met with Sitting Bull under a flag of truce. In a tense meeting on 20 October, Sitting Bull demanded that all soldiers leave the area permanently and only then might he be willing to come into the reservation or make an agreement with the government. Miles offered to stand up an agency at Tongue River for Sitting Bull's band and those with him, but the two were at an impasse.¹²² Negotiations continued the next day until they broke down. Once hostilities started, Miles and his regiment attacked and drove off most of Sitting Bull's band successfully. After strong pursuit of the hostile band for nearly a week, Sitting Bull's close followers split from the larger band, and the remaining Lakota leadership from the band met again on 25 October with Miles. The Lakota leadership present, including Bull Eagle, Red Shirt, and Small Bear, were reservation Lakota: tired, hungry, worn, and poorly clad, and desired only to continue hunting without interference. While they did not want to surrender immediately, they seemed to desire peace.¹²³ On 26 October, the negotiations continued, Miles told the Lakota that he was prepared to pursue and attack them indefinitely, and they agreed to surrender.¹²⁴

The Cedar Creek fight seemed to represent the first significant victory of the fall for the Army. Miles estimated 300-400 lodges had agreed to surrender, but only forty lodges of agency Lakota actually surrendered. Miles had also made promises of land concessions he could not have delivered.¹²⁵ However, Terry almost immediately noted Miles' success recognized that it set precedent for further surrender when combined with the other aspects of disarming and

¹²² Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 96; Greene, *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 100-1.

¹²³ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 107.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143-4.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

dismounting, and Sherman and Sheridan echoed his assessment.¹²⁶ From an operational perspective, even the surrender of a few lodges showed that relentless pursuit could effectively support the disarming and dismounting program at the reservation.

Miles maintained pressure on the bands of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse from November through January. After outfitting his regiment for arctic conditions, his regiment walked over 1000 miles in relentless pursuit of these two bands. Lieutenant James Baldwin, leading one small battalion, acted on intelligence gained near Fort Peck and eventually found Sitting Bull's band at Ash Creek on 18 December. Baldwin gained a complete victory despite only killing one Lakota warrior and no friendly casualties, and forced Sitting Bull to leave the United States and flee to Canada, never again able to resist the United States Government by force.¹²⁷ Miles immediately turned his attention to attacking Crazy Horse as soon as he learned of Baldwin's victory over Sitting Bull. After several days of indications of Lakota presence and pursuit, Miles caught up to Crazy Horse's band on 7 January 1877 at Wolf Mountain, and defeated his band in a snowstorm the following day. Despite suffering no casualties, Crazy Horse's band, including Cheyenne chiefs Little Wolf and Dull Knife, fled all night on 8 January to escape to the south, losing most of their shelter, winter clothing, and food.¹²⁸ Miles was not able to sortie out again until receiving supplies the following April, but with Crook's victory over Dull Knife in November, all the remaining major hostile bands were defeated and no longer possessed the ability to resist.

¹²⁶ Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1876*, 471; Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 114-5.

¹²⁷ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 143-4. Fort Peck was not an Army base, but initially only an Indian Agency for the Yanktonnais Sioux. Miles established an Army presence there after the campaign in 1877, and abandoned the fort in 1881.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 177-8.

Crook sortied out in November intending to strike Crazy Horse but instead defeated the large Cheyenne band under Dull Knife on 25 November 1876.¹²⁹ He assembled a large force at Camp Robinson on 31 October with 1497 troops and over 250 Indian guides. These included a company of 100 Pawnee, nine Cheyenne, and seventy-three Lakota.¹³⁰ This force defeated Dull Knife in the Big Horn Mountains on 26 November. The fight broke Cheyenne resistance and placed additional burden on Crazy Horse's Oglala band when the Cheyenne took shelter with them. While not conclusive, these battles set the conditions for the actions needed to close out the campaign. In early December, Sheridan took advantage of Crook's absence from the southern agencies, and ordered Major Julius W. Mason of Third Cavalry to retrieve arms and ponies from these agencies. The Army confiscated 290 ponies and seventy-five rifles, including some recovered from Custer's command.¹³¹

Both Miles' and Crook's commands culminated in January 1877 due to supply issues. The severe winter weather also limited their operations and their ability to find the hostile bands, but they and Sheridan assumed that the difficulty was more severe for the Indians away from the reservation.¹³² These difficulties forced both Miles and Crook, to search for another way to encourage more surrenders. They resorted to the use of emissaries and diplomacy to bring in the remaining hostile bands. General Crook started sending emissaries led by Spotted Tail in late January 1877 to find Crazy Horse's people and encourage them to surrender. Crook offered blankets, food and clothing. While initially reluctant to help, Spotted Tail also carried Crook's

¹²⁹ "Letters Received, Department of Dakota," telegram, Crook to Sheridan, 26 November 1876. In his report, Crook claimed that he sought the Cheyenne, but in every other contemporary account available from before the battle, he claimed he sought Crazy Horse.

¹³⁰ Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 29.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 165. Sheridan did this without Crook's knowledge, and Crook did not learn about the action until he returned two weeks later.

¹³² Department of War, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, 55.

promise to gain an agency in the Powder River area west of the Black Hills if they surrendered, going beyond his ability to deliver. In this way, Crook had bluffed with a carrot-and-stick approach, offering to use his influence with President-elect Hayes to gain favorable treatment while threatening further attacks if they did not come in. By 13 February 1877 some Minneconjous and Sans Arcs agreed to come in.¹³³ Miles started his own initiative, ignorant of Crook's efforts. He used envoy known to the Lakota, John Bruguier, who departed on 1 February to invite hostile chiefs to come in. By 19 February, a small group of Oglala, Minneconjou, and Cheyenne chiefs came to the Tongue River cantonment, where Miles met with them and secured a promise of surrender from the two most influential of the group, White Bull and Little Chief. When they returned on 23 March, Miles also bluffed to push them the last step, threatening renewed fighting and offering a possible agency on the Yellowstone River. In the process, he ensured they understood that they must turn in ponies and arms.¹³⁴ As Miles recorded, Little Chief stated the position of the remaining non-agency Lakota, "We are weak, compared with you and your forces; we are out of ammunition; we cannot make a rifle, a round of ammunition, or a knife; in fact we are at the mercy of those who are taking possession of our country; your terms are harsh and cruel, but we are going to accept them and place ourselves at your mercy."¹³⁵

The efforts at diplomacy seemed to be the final element that split the resistance of the remaining hostile bands and exploited the fighting efforts of the fall and early winter. Starting in the late winter and spring of 1877, large groups started to surrender. Starting at the Cheyenne River Agency, 229 Minneconjou and Sans Arc lodges surrendered on 25 February. On 13 March, 133 Cheyenne turned themselves in with 130 Lakota the next day at Red Cloud Agency. In early

¹³³ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 187-8.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 188-94.

¹³⁵ Nelson A. Miles, *Personal Recollections and Observations of General Nelson A. Miles*, (New York: De Capo Press, 1969 [1896]), 243.

April, 386 more Cheyenne surrendered, with a large group of nearly 1000 Lakota surrendering the next day on 14 April as reported by the Indian Agent. A week later, Dull Knife and the last of the 524 Cheyenne surrendered on 21 April.¹³⁶ Finally, on 6 May 1877 Crazy Horse and another 900 Lakota surrendered, the culmination of over what Sheridan estimated to be over 3300 surrenders attributed to the “constant pounding and sleepless activity on the part of our troops, (Colonel Miles in particular).”¹³⁷

After the bulk of the surrenders, one Minneconjou chief named Lame Deer swore never to surrender in April 1877, and on 7 May 1877, Miles’ command caught and defeated Lame Deer and his fifty-one lodges in a crushing defeat, ending the last organized resistance by the Lakota away from the reservations. With ample support from the bases established in the previous fall, Miles immediately resupplied his forces after the battle in the field and pushed out separate columns to find the remnants of Sitting Bull’s followers. Eleventh Infantry built the other planned Yellowstone River valley post on the Big Horn River in May 1877 as well.¹³⁸ Miles established network of bases effectively controlled all Indian movement in an area that a year before was entirely dominated by the Lakota and Cheyenne. Lame Deer’s village scattered, but caused no further problems for settlers or other tribes, and had completely surrendered with the last 224 persons at Camp Sheridan on 10 September 1877.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Greene, *Morningstar Dawn*, 188-9; Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 198; Cozzens, 529.

¹³⁷ Department of War, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, 55; Crook, 215. Parentheses in Sheridan’s original report.

¹³⁸ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 215-8. The Tongue River and Big Horn River cantonments were renamed Fort Keogh and Fort Custer respectively.

¹³⁹ Department of War, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, 55-6.

Conclusion

During his expedition into the area in July 1877 with General Sherman, Sheridan provided his assessment of the campaign, “I now regard the Sioux Indian problem, as a war question, as solved by the operations of General Miles last winter, and by the establishment of the two new posts on the Yellowstone now assured this summer.”¹⁴⁰ Without Sheridan tying those actions to the disarming and dismounting program at the reservation and the confinement of the Lakota and Cheyenne to the reservation, those battles would have had no lasting effect, and the new posts might have met the same fate as the old Bozeman Trail forts isolated and abandoned.

After the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Sheridan recognized the huge amount of support the non-agency Lakota, received from those that lived on the reservation. Sheridan needed to separate the hostiles from the preponderance of their fighting strength in order to beat them decisively. To do so, he disarmed and dismounted them at the reservation. To do that he had to get control of the reservations and put significantly more of his own forces there to carry it out. Knowing that the Indians could not sustain the large grouping for long and that they would not go willingly to the reservations, Sheridan used continuous military pressure on the isolated non-agency hostiles in order to compel them to surrender. Sheridan needed to find a way to pursue the various bands in the winter when they lacked the support of the agency Indians, until they had no choice but to starve and freeze or to submit to the reservation. To allow for this relentless pursuit, he built up a supply network of posts that made it possible to fight anywhere in the unceded territories.

Sheridan developed a campaign plan that linked all the various tactical actions and developed conditions for the settlement of the Black Hills and unceded territories in Wyoming, Montana and Dakota Territory. Sheridan linked new forts in the contested areas for logistical

¹⁴⁰ Phillip H Sheridan and William T. Sherman, *Reports of Inspection Made in the Summer of 1877* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878), 28.

support and interdiction of hostile movement with actions taken to disarm and dismount all Lakota and Cheyenne. The actions confining the Indians to the reservation separated them from the remaining hostiles who depended on the agency Indians for fighting strength and support.

While a great deal of the history written about this campaign focuses on the battles, the costs of the campaign indicated that the Army did not fight or kill its way to victory. After the Battle of Slim Buttes, using the numbers referenced by Jerome Green and Paul Hutton, as well as official reports, the Army inflicted 61 killed on the Lakota and Cheyenne in six engagements, with forty of those in the Dull Knife fight against a total Lakota and Cheyenne population of over 20,000. Miles, in his relentless and decisive pursuit from October 1876 to January 1877 killed only seven Lakota. The Division of the Missouri reported the total costs and losses of the campaign. Army losses from February 1876 through December 1877 numbered 283 men killed and 125 wounded. Indian losses were approximately 150 killed and 90 wounded, including the noncombatants. The monetary cost to the government according to the Military Division of the Missouri was about \$2.3 million. Considering that over ninety percent of these losses occurred at the Battle of Little Big Horn and the last two of Miles' actions in the winter of 1876 and 1877 against the Lakota totaled one Lakota casualty, it is clear that the Army did not defeat the Lakota and Cheyenne population of over 21,000 primarily by fighting.¹⁴¹

While Sheridan seemed to have a conception of the operational vision for the campaign from the beginning, his initial campaign planning did not demonstrate sufficient elements of operational art for success. Only after the significant defeats of the campaign was Sheridan, and only Sheridan able to crystallize his vision and synchronize tactical events across the northern plains in a way to meet operational objectives that achieved his required strategic ends.

¹⁴¹ Hedren, *After Custer*, xiii.

Sheridan discerned the fundamental character of conflict as a need to project power into the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne heartland. By pacifying the Lakota and Cheyenne, and preventing unfettered access to their preferred hunting grounds, he could directly secure the area of conflict from the 1868 treaty, while giving the Indians no respite in their preferred hunting grounds. Coordinated tactical actions between the unceded territory and the reservation split the winter roaming hostiles from their base of support and strong summer fighting strength of the agency Indians. Future Lakota and Cheyenne hostilities were impossible once confined by the Army to the reservation without the implements of their preferred fighting methods. In the long term, this confinement destroyed their lifestyle, subjugating them in all but spirit. Sherman and Sheridan's report in the summer of 1877 showed how the forts needed to have lasting effect, "For some years, however, we will be forced to keep here [in the Yellowstone and Big Horn River valleys] a pretty strong garrison, because, besides defending this point, detachments must go out to protect other threatened forts, and to follow any small parties engaged in depredations..."¹⁴²

The fundamental source conflict between the United States Government and the Lakota was the unceded territory from the Treaty of 1868 and the Black Hills. Anxious to realize this strategic objective, the Interior Department exploited the Army's efforts even before they had turned the tide of the campaign. George W. Manypenny led a commission to buy the Black Hills in August 1876 from the Lakota remaining on the agencies. Offering gifts and threatening to withhold food, the commission forced the chiefs on the reservations to sign away the Black Hills in violation of the Treaty of 1868 by getting ascent from an insufficient number of Sioux chiefs to make the cession of land valid.¹⁴³ Even Manypenny, as Sheridan's critic, acknowledged Sheridan's claim that the commission caused problems for the Army with the Lakota and

¹⁴² Sheridan and Sherman, 28.

¹⁴³ Crook, 216-7.

Cheyenne remaining at the agencies and dissuaded others from returning. The commission also tried to push all the Lakota and Cheyenne down to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma in the fall of 1876. The leadership Division of the Missouri Army was adamantly opposed to the proposal on its merits, and the commission dropped the idea. Sheridan also recognized that the minor chiefs still at the reservation did not properly represent the rest of the Sioux, and that these chiefs signed the document under duress by the Indian Affairs leadership of the commission.¹⁴⁴ In effect, this helped Sheridan to understand that the Sioux reservation as it existed in 1875 had to be a part of his solution.

The campaign against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne during the Great Sioux War represented a fighting peak in the Indian Wars. After finally attaining the decisive battle it sought, the Army lost badly. Lieutenant General Sheridan transformed his original poorly formed concept for the war into an expression that modern readers would recognize as operational art after the Battle of Little Big Horn, connecting a series of tactical actions through time, space and purpose to attain a strategic objective

¹⁴⁴ Manypenny, 353-4.

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